

Responses to the COVID-19 crisis in Ireland: From feminized to feminist

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Abstract

In this study, we conceptualize feminist engagement with neo-liberalism, austerity, and crisis management and analyze potential to advance a feminist "recovery" political agenda. Feminist discursive analysis of crisis and a focus on narrative enables analysis of continuity and change in feminist responses to the pandemic and exposes the nature of opportunities and constraints for mobilization on gender equality. A case study of responses to the pandemic in Ireland and empirical data in areas of care, income support and domestic violence is presented to reflect on gendered analysis of austerity and feminist responses to same, on gendered effects of COVID-19 and feminist responses to pandemic crisis management. The case studies allow us to interrogate feminist's use of crisis to advance social transformation. We discuss whether and how feminist actors in Ireland built on learning from previous crises to generate opportunity to advance feminist demands, to break continuities by reframing old problems and to mobilize in relation to COVID-19. We find some continuity over time, but also greater awareness of connective tissues of multiple crises, making overall strategies of feminist actors and organizations less reactive, more innovative, inclusive and independent than the previous crisis with greater potential for social transformation.

KEYWORDS

feminized, feminist, framing, Ireland, pandemic

1 | INTRODUCTION

Preliminary analysis of COVID-19 confirms what analysis of previous pandemics concluded, a series of immediate gendered effects and the deepening of longer-term gendered inequalities (Wenham et al., 2020). These include the worsening of gender penalties of low pay, unpaid care work, unemployment, risk of exposure to infection and of sexual violence (Aolain, 2011). This study examines the gendered effects of COVID-19 and feminist responses to pandemic crisis management in one context, as a contribution to theorizing feminist responses to crises. Drawing on emergent feminist critique of crisis management and COVID-19 (Branicki, 2020; Gedalof, 2018), we extend such discussion using empirical data from Ireland to detail the gendered impact of the pandemic and related crisis management responses, and feminist responses to both. We contextualize our analysis of feminist responses to COVID-19 by drawing on learning from feminist responses to and analysis of austerity, asking whether and how feminist actors built on learning from previous crises to generate opportunity to advance feminist demands, to break continuities by reframing old problems and to mobilize in relation to COVID-19.

Our contribution lies in establishing the gendered effects of COVID-19 in a specific empirical context while assessing the potential and limits of feminist responses to a crisis environment. The Irish case illustrates aspects of trends identified elsewhere. Irish society sits at the nexus of tensions in the European project, around austerity and fiscal policy, Brexit, and the US corporate globalization. Irish political culture and political party formations mean there is an absence of hard right populism in party political terms, however, a legacy of conservatism is evident in Irish political architecture that sets the context for state response to crisis and feminist mobilization. Despite this predisposition toward conservative and paternalistic policies there has been a significant advancement of progressive bio-politics (divorce, marriage equality, and abortion), however less progression on socioeconomic rights indicates mixed success for feminist and civil society mobilization. The Irish case can act as an exemplar offering insights into feminist attempts to address crisis in the context of permanent austerity, conservative, and micro-populist politics. By extension, this case also illustrates how COVID-19 has implications for gender equality and offers a way to assess feminist responses to crises.

We first ground our analysis in feminist theory of patriarchy. Conceptualizations of how feminists engage with neo-liberalism, austerity and crisis management help us understand the continuity and change in feminist responses and the opportunities and constraints for mobilization on gender equality in the pandemic. We then develop our methodology and equip the reader with some basic parameters to engage with the Irish case study. Next, we briefly reflect on the feminist impacts of and responses to austerity in Ireland. Having established the gendered effects of the pandemic, we then focus on feminist responses in three areas: care, income maintenance, and domestic violence, and analyze what can be learned about feminist responses and attempts to frame and reframe narratives. We conclude with an assessment of potential to advance a feminist "recovery" political agenda. Drawing on feminist discursive analysis of crisis Gedalof (2018) and Branicki's (2020) critique of the narrative and mechanics of crisis management, we assess how "feminist" over "feminized" framing of the pandemic can reveal the 'connective tissue' across crises and advance an agenda for social transformation.

2 | FEMINIST APPROACHES TO PATRIARCHY AND CRISES

Manne (2019) theorizes how the patriarchal social order locates women as givers of feminine-coded goods and services such as affection, sex, and reproductive labor, and men as the entitled recipients of these goods and services. In her assessment, women are in turn expected to refrain from taking traditionally masculine goods "such as power and authority" (Manne, 2019). Male entitlement is as such coded into cultural scripts, law, policy, and social practices that undergird a gendered economy where women are perpetual debtors laboring under crushing obligations. These assumptions reverberate in the pandemic as male experts and masculinist narrative shape the "fight against COVID-19" that include a valorization yet an undervaluation of feminine-coded frontline care work.

This sense of women as "obligated givers" rings true in an essential economy like Ireland's where 70% of the front line economy are women, most of whom are low paid (CSO, 2020a, 2020b) and where the welfare architecture remains a male breadwinner household based regime (M. P. Murphy, 2019).

Manne's (2019) powerful critique of what male entitlement costs women and other marginalized groups reveals the moral frameworks that support the deeply asymmetrical expectations and realities of care. This study makes the topography of male privilege clear yet underspecifies the intersection between the cultural and material dynamics of the gendered economy. Feminist theorization of crises and crisis management helps us to explore the discursive, affective, and material dimensions of masculinist neoliberal policy and discourse and the political consequences for women in all their diversity.

Branicki (2020) grounds her feminist theorizing of crisis governance in Gilligan's (1993) feminist ethic of care, which values connections, interdependence, reciprocity, and the tie between relationship and responsibility. Such an approach rejects modes of rational neoliberal governance that underpins crisis management. Her approach is reminiscent of other critiques such as Duncan and Edwards (1997) emphasis on gendered moral rationality to understand how policy makers often disregard or pathologize how women mediate care related decisions and fulfil conflicting responsibilities to different people.

A rejection of individualism (Sevenhuijsen, 2003) is a central feature of normative public policy or critical political theory, which disaggregates care as constituted by relationships and connections between givers and receivers (Sevenhuijsen, 2003 in Branicki, 2020, p. 8). For Branicki (2020, p. 9), crisis management grounded in individual calculative assumptions will lead to a return to "normal." Adopting a set of relational assumptions to guide crisis response may instead facilitate social transformation. Rational crisis management defines crises as episodes in isolation—bounded by time and lack of connection to other crises, while feminist crisis management understands crises as

Multiple and contextualized, as enduring and overlapping phenomena that are enmeshed and embedded within each other to a significant extent. Crises compound and confound each other within webs of relationships informed by care (Branicki, 2020, p. 10).

Branicki's (2020) call to ground crisis management in organizational concepts of care (oriented by philosophies of care) leads her to privilege webs of connection founded in care relations. This feminist approach aims to reframe how care has featured in crisis management to date in instrumental ways tied to economic performance or sentimentalized or privatized to be absorbed by women.

The "connective tissue" across crises is also evident in how austerity, in weakening public infrastructure, has worsened the effects of the current pandemic (Soener, 2020). The multiplicative and overlapping aspects of crises are that which goes unacknowledged in rationalist crisis management (Branicki, 2020). A call for gender proofing (with an intersectional focus) of crisis management exemplifies this approach.

We extend this metaphor of connective tissue across crises to make visible the overlapping and interconnecting impact of austerity that runs through the pandemic era. In empirical terms, the connective tissue of crises is evident in the social suffering of those located at the intersection of complex social inequalities and through the connections between poverty and violence. Connective tissue also captures connections across time, policies, and relationships often obscured in reactive rationalist crisis response. We return to "issues of connection" and alternative feminist approaches to crisis management in our methodology section and our discussion and conclusion.

Feminist discursive and narrative analysis expose techniques used to justify austerity and manufacture consent (Gedalof, 2018; Manne, 2019; Negra & Tasker, 2014). Gedalof (2018) applies her work on austerity to the pandemic underlining how policy discourses impose "chronologies of past, present, and future, how they construct the narrative arc of crisis and resolution." Drawing on Hemmings (2011) concept of "political grammar," she refers to how narrative techniques are stitched together to secure dominant meanings and to reproduce their status as "common sense." The political grammar of austerity involved state and political elites using a "politics of address" that limited entitlements and supported deep cuts by constructing hierarchies of deservedness, denigrating both

public spending and those dependent on the state. Such discursive techniques set the terms for a wider political culture of perpetual "crisis management" which communicates the welfare state as a burden on its citizens, that the good citizen shows no vulnerability; that socially necessary work of care can be marginalized and that our social interdependence can and should be disavowed (Gedatof, 2018). The challenges of the pandemic reveal the fallacy of this logic. The "political grammar" of statements such as "we are all in this together" obscured uneven experiences of austerity and now, she argues, the pandemic.

3 | FEMINIZED AND FEMINIST RESPONSE TO CRISES

We distinguish between feminized and feminist responses to crisis and crisis management, which we use the feminist theory discussed above to unpack. In using the term feminized, we refer to ideas and framing that tend to reinforce aspects of gender stereotypes communicated through women's experiences, subjectivities, physical presence, and affect. These frameworks may be viewed as "strategic essentialism" where gendered constructions of maternalism, vocation, empathy, support, and so on are conveyed to secure public support and align with aspects of female subjectivities. Feminized framing tends toward a valorization of female suffering and labor, specifically care work raising the risk of sentimentalizing and privatizing care. Using gender in this way to do political and ideational work can promote resonance, create solidarity and enlist public support but it may also mean that gender features obliquely at best as a power relation. Feminist ideas and framing are often also present in such campaigns and can sit in tension with feminized representations in ways that open up or close down a consideration of the structural sources of gender inequality.

A feminized response to crisis recognizes that a targeted policy response to women or a specific cohort of women is needed but falls short of seeking social transformation. Further feminized responses are bounded in time tend not to interconnect with other issues, privileging individual testimonials rather than relationships between people that can reinforce mainstream narratives and gender stereotypes. In contrast, "feminist responses to reframing crisis" are characterized by resisting mainstream neoliberal discourse that seeks to individualize and frame problems in calculative rational terms. Feminist responses are likely to stress the tissue of connections across time, policy themes, and relationships that lead to a different form of response and to different alliance formations (Fraser, 2016). A focus on narrative and "political grammar" allows us to make an analytical distinction between feminized and feminist approaches to crises and informs our methodology and analysis of the case studies.

In distinguishing between feminized and feminist, we do not argue that strategic essentialism is always counterproductive. Maternalism has had strong purchase in working class, ethnic minority, and migrant communities in the form of activist motherhood (Naples, 1998, p. 112). Black feminist scholars centered experiences of black mothers (community organizing against austerity, for immigrant rights against gun violence, and the Million-Mom March), and as forms of political subjectivity (Emejelu & Bassel, 2017). We also acknowledge that there is no pure identifiable feminist knowledge, rather feminist ideas and actions are always shaped by the very ideology, political project and form of governmentality they reject (Eschle, & Maiguacha, 2018). Epistemic splitting (Pereira, 2017) is evident in movement campaigns where some elements of feminist ideas are deemed valuable, but some are not. In the next section, we review recent feminist analysis of austerity and crisis management.

4 | FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF AUSTERITY AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Through a focus on bringing lived experience into policy analysis and their critique of mechanisms of governmentality and discourse, feminist scholarship on austerity revealed gendered analysis as side-lined and gendered effects as silenced as female bodies and labor were positioned to absorb the shock tactics of crisis. Such work (Brah, Ianna, & Irene, 2015; Kantola et al., 2017) concluded that gender blind public policy approaches to economic crises reproduced gendered, raced, and classed patterns that reversed and or delayed progress on gender

equality (Perugini, Rakić, Vladisavljević, & Marko, 2019) and reproduced a permanent crises especially for minority women (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017). Analysis of how gender is both missing from but fundamental to neoliberal governance is important in understanding its role in political management of crises. Gender is used to underpin political and economic work while gender analysis is absent from official discourse and policymaking. This presence and absence enable austerity seem both legitimate and coherent (O'Dwyer, 2018, Walby, 2018) and make it harder for feminists to critique political processes that normalize austerity (Griffin, 2015).

Griffin (2015) reveals how gendered techniques of governance are key elements of crisis management. These are mainstreamed into society as forms of regulatory power that intertwine and overlap as they carry forward dynamics of inequality and privilege with gendered effects (Branicki, 2020). Rationalist approaches to crisis management are typified by utilitarian logics, masculine, and militaristic language, and the belief that crises follow linear processes of signal detection, preparation prevention, containment, recovery, and learning (Branicki, 2020). As an alternative to a rationalist approach to crisis, crisis management informed by a feminist ethics of care and a relational logic seeks social transformation, an alternative we return to in our conclusion.

How feminists should and do respond to discursive and policy prescriptions of austerity has been the subject of much debate. For some, feminism has acquiesced to neoliberal logics (Fraser, 2016; Lewis, Adamson, Biese, & Kelan, 2019). Eschle and Maiguascha (2018) argue against dismissing feminism as either co-opted or resistant to an undifferentiated account of neoliberalism (2018, 234–236). Empirically, feminism(s) have reacted to crises and resisted austerity often in coalition with other civil society groups but with variable outcomes for the visibility of feminist perspectives. Dean and Bice (2018) argued that in the United Kingdom, feminism was simultaneously affirmed and marginalized within left politics and spaces, specifically when attempting opposition to austerity politics. In Spain, feminist activists fought to play a central role in the new social movements and populist left parties, which responded to the government's austerity politics (Lombardo, 2017). At the same time, populist right wing attempts in Spain and Poland to restrict abortion have sparked feminist resistance and street protests often mobilizing women in feminized occupations and solidarity movements (Alonso & Lombardo, 2018; Korolczuk, 2017). However, overall it is autonomous feminist resistance, often anti-racist or black feminist that have engaged in the most critical and expansive critiques of austerity (Emejulu & Bassel, 2017).

Gendered "reforms" and gendered silences were key elements of austerity reproduced in male dominated contexts and justified in discursive terms that suppressed dissent (O'Dwyer, 2018). Gender silences on crisis continue now in how women are poorly represented in global decision-making on COVID-19 (Wenham et al., 2020). Men's voices dominate pandemic responses, and the approaches of many governments are increasingly shaped by masculinist politics. In some contexts, COVID-19 has been weaponized by right wing forces with moves in Poland and Hungary to suppress sexual health and reproductive rights and more generally to contain dissent and debate on gender equality (COE, 2020). In Spain, a resurgent feminist movement and specifically the March 8th International Women's Day marches, were blamed by the right-wing Vox party for spreading the virus. Political discourses used to buoy public compliance to state measures often draw on masculinist language of on a "silent enemy" or fighting a war "that provides COVID-19 with a supposed intentionality to invade and harm the nation, thus eliding the anthropic structures and political responsibilities that enabled and accelerated its spread" (Ugolotti, 2020). These patriarchal discourses underpin government policy that prioritizes male-dominated sectors of the economy and society at the expense of restoring services crucial to women's access to health care and the labor market (Gaweda, 2020).

5 | METHODOLOGY AND CASE STUDY

This methodological section gives insight into data collection and our qualitative analytical process. Overall, we use a "snapshot" case study approach as a "bounded entity" to generate knowledge about the broader social phenomenon in a specific empirical context (Yin, 2011, p. 6). A gendered analysis is applied to crisis management responses across three specific cases, to identify the specific gendered features. We first contextualize our analysis

In previous gendered studies of austerity in Ireland, we proceed methodologically by analyzing COVID-19 era feminist responses in three policy areas: income support, care, and domestic violence. We choose these as pivotal policy areas around which key narratives revolved. We draw on data gathered during a specific 6-month period from February 1st to July 1st, 2020, which incorporates a timeline of pre and post COVID-19 feminist mobilization in Ireland. This includes a general election in February 2020, the initial emergency response and early lock down in March 2020, through to a latter period where crisis management was elaborated into a newly formed Programme for Government in June 2020. Data to inform the three case studies were gathered from official state data, parliamentary debates, media, interviews with feminist actors, webinars hosted by feminist and academic institutions and digital campaign material related to civil society organizations including nongovernmental organizations involved in campaigning and service delivery and Trade Unions.

We develop a comparative analysis of framing across the case studies to link empirical data and feminist theorization of crisis. Key variables for analysis include feminist responses, feminized responses, ethic of care, alliances, relational and connective analysis, moral rationality, intersectional impacts, and ambitions for social transformation. Overall, we assess whether campaigns hold core feminist messaging and goals, we further elucidate our arguments and contributions in the discussion and conclusion section.

Our analysis aims to identify underlying ideas and conceptualizations supporting prominent forms of discursive engagement. Adopting Gedalof's (2018), interpretation of "political grammar," we focus on how feminists adopt their own narratives and mobilize to counter dominant state crisis era "political grammar." Our focus is on feminists' own strategies and discursive efforts to make visible gendered silences and gendered effects in feminist only and or collaborative campaigns. We are interested in whether feminist responses have changed or are continuous with previous austerity contexts. We examine how successful feminists have been in centering feminist demands. The analysis does not seek binary answers, rather responses are understood as on spectrum. As indicated in Table 1, we are interested in whether overall strategies of feminist actors and organizations are proactive or reactive, whether they are more innovative, inclusive and independent than the previous crisis, and whether feminist actors were more likely to hold their own messaging within cross-sectoral spaces.

6 | IRELAND AS A CASE STUDY

Irish feminist responses occur in a relatively consensus-oriented democracy characterized in a unitary and centralized, multi-party system. The Irish electoral system—proportional representation through a single transferable vote—is associated with a political culture of brokerage and clientelism and fosters strong localism. The party system was significantly impacted by the 2008 economic crisis and austerity, with greater fragmentation and less of the traditional dominance of the two largest center-right parties Fine Gael (FG) and Fianna Fáil (FF). Following an inconclusive February 8th, 2020 General Election, a temporary government led during the early COVID-19 period. A new government formed on June 29th (comprising FG in coalition with traditional rivals FF and the smaller Green Party) cementing a predominant center right agenda. A low tax effort per capita is a core feature of the Irish political economy, consequently there is poor public service provision, and the low paid gendered foundational economy is market oriented (Economic Social Research Institute [ESRI], 2019).

A central actor in our analysis is the feminist organization the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi)³ an umbrella national member organization that receives state funds and consolidates activities of predominantly liberal feminist women's organizations. Small radical and anarchist groups persist on the margins and operate in parallel, in alliance, or in contest with this more formalized arm of the Irish women's movement, contesting boundaries of feminism in Ireland (M. Murphy & Cullen, 2018). NWCi dependence on state funding was exposed during austerity when state funding was reduced by 35% in one budget, while the organization worked to maintain state relationships considered necessary for financial survival even in economic recovery funding waxes and wanes (Cullen & Murphy, 2016).

TABLE 1 Comparison of feminist responses to austerity and COVID-19

Austerity era feminist response	Maternalist feminized	Single issue	Women defined by specific policy issue	Reactive and defensive	Dependent loss of visibility in alliances
COVID-19 feminist response	Maternalist feminized AND feminist	Relational (connective tissue of issues and crises)	Women situated at the intersection of policy issues	Proactive and offensive unprecedented	Independent visible in alliances

7 | FEMINIST RESPONSES TO AUSTERITY IN IRELAND

From 2008 to 2014, Ireland experienced a period of deep economic crisis and a significant programme of EU sanctioned austerity. While Ireland had formally entered economic recovery in 2014 high rates of family homelessness, child poverty and deficits in a range of public services suggest an uneven "post crisis" experience (Barry, 2020). Social conservatism around distributional politics alongside the state's ideological commitment to social disinvestment and austerity limited opportunities for social movement mobilization and created an inhospitable political context for feminist claims (Cullen & Murphy, 2016). In the austerity context, a strong discourse of "collective responsibility and national interest" (Coulter & Nagle, 2015) was mobilized alongside male dominated decision-making and a gender-blind approach to management of the economic crisis (Murphy, 2015). This political grammar (Gedalof, 2018) underlined a significant transfer of public funds to secure the Irish banking system. Austerity continues to haunt Irish social policy contributing to rising female and family homelessness, lone parent poverty, gender pension, and pay gaps (Barry, 2020). Early indications suggest that the political and public policy responses to the pandemic deepen these dynamics as women are situated to absorb the care gap left by the closure of schools and childcare and their separation from other forms of familial family support (Doyle, 2020a, 2020b).

Irish feminists' analysis of the Irish economic crisis and austerity (Barry & Conroy, 2014) revealed the gendered effects of a depleted public service infrastructure and civil society sector. In other work (Cullen & Murphy, 2016), we mapped feminist organization and gendered resistance in league with trade unions and leftist organizations in short lived and single-issue defensive campaigns to protest severe cuts to supports for disabled children, child benefit and lone parents. Maternalist frameworks succeeded in eliciting partial political responses yet risked deepening the populist claims of the discourse and promoting traditional social relations, while leftist political actors obfuscated efforts to promote feminist analysis. In effect, feminist response to crisis was shaped by resort to a politics of adaptation, pragmatism, and survival.

Over the last decade, feminist leadership and focus has been more on bio-politics in the form of repealing the constitutional ban on abortion, than socioeconomic issues, this was logical given progress was most likely on cost neutral policy gains. A traditional absence in Irish politics of a class distributional agenda and weakness of trade union feminism meant few cross sectoral campaigns on social disinvestment and financialization of public services, hallmarks of austerity. Feminist engagement on austerity is best characterized as reactive and defensive while involvement in broader anti-austerity protests often found feminist ideas and arguments side-lined. Analysis of feminist engagement on issues such as family homelessness revealed how feminist activism and ideas can receive leftist affirmation yet how often female suffering and gender politics more broadly are used to do leftist political work while feminist actors and ideas are marginalized. The result produced campaigns where these issues were feminized rather than feminist (M. Murphy & Cullen, 2018).

A new generation of campaigning specifically around investment in public services specifically housing, health, early childhood education and care, had emerged at the beginning of 2020 with a strong presence of female

dominated professions and feminist groups including the NWC (P. Cullen, 2020). This organizing, while not explicitly feminist, focused several disparate groups to harmonize discursive strategies to analyze the legacy of austerity and marketization of public services. These campaigns faced a strong discourse and political grammar of "economic recovery" in Ireland (Coulter & Arqueros-Fernández, 2020) that supported political party consensus to continue a low tax and low social investment approach.

8 | IRISH CRISIS MANAGEMENT RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC—A GENDER BLIND APPROACH.

Ireland experienced the pandemic later than mainland European states with the first deaths occurring in early March 2020. Public health campaigns used the "we are all in this together" frame to legitimate forms of quarantine (Government of Ireland, 2020a). Lockdowns were especially difficult for poor and lone parent families, both disproportionately female. State initiatives such as "Ireland's Call"² and "Community Call"³ sought volunteers to offer services and or donations to service provider charities, to compensate for the weakness of privatized and or weak public service infrastructure. The political grammar of "together" was deployed to mobilize communities (often predominantly women) to support one another and maintain lockdown conditions.⁴ This was consistent with past political culture and practice embedded in charity and volunteerism and characterized by moral hierarchies of deservedness (Adshead, 2008). However, the pandemic was not an equalizing experience (COVID-19 NGO Group, 2020) with women's well-being more adversely affected with more women (38.6%) compared with men (26.0%) feeling downhearted and depressed, while twice as many women were extremely concerned about maintaining social ties. Men expressed higher interest in continuing remote working post COVID-19 (61%) compared to women (44%) reflecting their higher levels of care burden (CSO, 2020a).

A lack of gender balance in senior decision-making roles and within public health service contexts (Russell et al., 2017) is reflected in a lack of female experts and gender expertise within the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET), the state body charged with pandemic management (Government of Ireland, 2020b). Its exclusively male senior team featured in daily news briefings and frequent media reporting. A subcommittee of NPHET for vulnerable groups has no representation of women's organizations, ethnic minorities, or migrants but did consult with larger charity-based service providers privileging the volunteer model. A gender blind policy response is evident in the omission of certain groups of women from pandemic income supports. The early closure of all screening services for cervical and breast cancer, and childcare facilities and contrasts with the detailed attempts to re-open economic and leisure activities including male dominated sports (Government of Ireland, 2020c). As "recovery" plans are constructed, the continuing exclusion of women's expertise and experience will reproduce existing and create new negative gendered effects.

9 | FEMINIST FRAMING AND CONTESTATION OF DOMINANT POLITICAL GRAMMAR

From the beginning of the pandemic, feminist organizations developed COVID-19 related resources for women (NWC, 2020a). In addition, the state feminist organization, the NWC organized a series of webinars entitled "the Feminist Agenda" to frame how COVID-19 affected women, and to promote a model of feminist recovery. By engaging with academic feminists, women in minority communities and the international feminist community the NWC adopted an inclusive approach to frame the need for a gender sensitive reform on economics and the pandemic, care, and gender-based violence (NWC, 2020b). Modelled on initiatives in the United Kingdom led by Fawcett and Women's Budget Group the NWC also initiated a survey on unpaid care (NWC, 2020c) and drew on international strategies including participation in Council of Europe events on COVID-19 and Sexual Health and

Reproductive Rights.⁵ Previous critique of NWCi for a lack of focus on minority and vulnerable women's experiences of austerity (Cullen & Murphy, 2016), was addressed in part by how disadvantaged women are centered in its pandemic work. In part, responding to the reignited Black Lives Matters movement the organization hosted and participated in a series of anti-racist webinars highlighting the experience of migrant, asylum seeker, Roma, and indigenous ethnic minority traveler women.⁶ The Abortion Rights Campaign, an important feminist actor in the form of a grassroots pro-choice collective that played a key role alongside the NWCi in delivering abortion in 2018, worked to secure a telemedicine approach to abortion referrals (Abortion Rights Coalition [ARC], 2020). This innovation was understood as essential in widening access to abortion to rural, poor, and undocumented or asylum seeker women. While feminist response to crisis is therefore evident at the national level, the following three case studies allow us to assess to what degree feminist framing is evident at a sectoral level. We first sketch the three cases, followed by analysis.

10 | CASE STUDY 1: FEMINIST RESPONSES TO CARE IN COVID-19

In Ireland, the pervasive undervaluing of care and poor care infrastructure impacts on women's access to paid work, while the concentration in low paid care work in turn increases women's risk of poverty. The state pursuit of the marketization of the care system has also played a role in relieving the state of its responsibility to find a public solution to care needs (P. Cullen, 2019). Austerity marked an intensification of a process where the state shifted human dependencies from public to private concerns. A narrative of recovery obscured the deficit of pathways to decent, sustainable employment that allows households to combine paid work and quality care (Barry, 2020). This crisis of care continues into and is amplified by the pandemic with extreme gendered impacts.

Like other European countries, the public health response to the pandemic marked a wholesale elimination of the care infrastructure predicated on the assumption that women would absorb this care deficit. Prior dependence on large scale institutionalized responses for social care needs and a shift to privatization (70% of all childcare and 80% of elder care) has created significant care deficits placing care burden on families, individuals, and disproportionately women. School closures were mandated from March 13th with reopening in September 2020. Respite care and day care for older people and those with disabilities also closed while residential care services were compromised in their capacity to respond by a significant initial lack of personal protection equipment (PPE). Quarantine measures reduced home care hours by 20%, there were few supports for family carers that contracted COVID-19 and inadequate safeguarding for those reliant on family carers, with related risks of abuse and violence (Sperrin, 2020). Home care workers, some undocumented and many migrants or living within the asylum seeker system, predominantly women, were not extended any childcare supports or access to additional COVID-19 income supports or additional wage payments (MRCI, 2020). Women and girls have taken on more unpaid care work at home and in their communities that threaten to deepen economic gender inequalities.⁸ In addition, 20% of the population is caring for someone as a result of COVID-19, women between 45 and 54 age register the highest rates of care (31%; CSO, 2020a, 2020b). Women represent the vast majority (80%) of healthcare workers (CSO, 2020b) and essential employees (70%; ESRI, 2020), these workers face disproportionate risks of exposure to the virus and were without childcare throughout the state sanctioned lockdown.

The issue of care in the context of the pandemic dominated public debate with both feminized and feminist analysis of care deficits. Feminist campaigns included demands for the provision of public childcare. A state programme to maintain the payment of childcare workers' was celebrated by feminist groups as the first step toward a subsidized universal childcare system (O'Connor, 2020a) and linked earlier pre-COVID-19 campaigns to pandemic care campaigns (NWCi, 2020e). There was a proactive attempt in social media and opinion articles to frame child care as an essential service drawing on state and media narratives valorizing female frontline care workers (O'Connor, 2020b). This campaign emerged from a focus on paid care work with trade unions, and early childcare providers and relied on feminized representations of selfless childcare workers and feminist arguments

for the valuation of care. Mothers and children reliant on childcare and low paid and minority female workers populated public demonstrations (NWC, 2020d). A new government policy in late June 2020 to provide cash supports for parents to purchase care, was framed by NWC as retrograde reinforcing marketization of care rather than state provision of affordable care (NWC, 2020d).

A lockdown ban on parents bringing children into public and retail contexts was resisted by the NWC and supported by lone parents' organizations emphasizing their lack of care supports.⁹ Other campaigns anchored by lone parent organizations and homeless charities allied with the NWC, linked the lack of affordable and accessible childcare with homelessness (using the twitter #ChildcarePreventsHomelessness). This campaign drew on female lone parents' testimonies of job and housing insecurity, exacerbated by scarcity of childcare (Focus Ireland, 2020). These analyses drew attention to structural gendered inequalities in the heart of the welfare state and the connective tissue between low paid female dominated work, activation measures applied to welfare for lone parents, paucity of childcare, poverty, and vulnerability to homelessness now exacerbated by the pandemic. NWC also ran a series of webinars highlighting deficits in public services including health underlined by a broader demand for the transformation of the care economy¹⁰ and a feminist agenda for the economy.¹¹ These drew on feminist political economics to discuss the role of care workers, access to universal basic services and individualized income to inform a post pandemic recovery.¹²

Other campaigns included Uplift, an online campaigning not for profit organization, and NWC, in an online petition to extend maternity leave by 3 months to address restrictions new mothers faced in accessing supports. This campaign attracted support within various women's networks (everymum.ie, rollercoaster.ie, and herfamily.ie) extending activism beyond feminist identified spaces.¹³ As part of the mobilization, mothers and new-born babies staged daily protests outside Parliament using #ExtendMatLeave2020 to publicize their action (NWC, 2020f).

NWC also supported childcare campaigns for feminized occupations (home care and allied health assistants) and worked alongside the Nurses Union to make connections between austerity era cuts in staff, high rates of infection and the childcare needs of frontline workers.¹⁴ These campaigns included testimony before the parliamentary committee on COVID-19 where nurses testified to using annual leave for childcare and or being separated from children for long periods to fulfil their work commitments safely.¹⁵

The political response framed health care workers as "heroes" and offered public statements of gratitude for their sacrifices, embodied in an emulation of clapping for our health care workers in other contexts. These discursive efforts to create a hagiography of nurses as selfless¹⁶ were deflected by the Nurse's Trade Union, supported by the NWC. Instead, they sought recruitment of additional staff (depleted during austerity) childcare for health care workers and access to additional staff and PPE in elder care facilities (predominated by older women).¹⁶

Overall, these campaigns are rooted in feminist ethics of care that predominates even alongside feminized elements evident in the profiling of motherhood in particular. At the same, the pandemic is framed as a critical juncture that highlights more broadly the undervaluation of care work and the deficits in care infrastructure suggesting the predominance of a feminist rather than feminized narrative. Alliances are evident, often between feminist or female dominated organizations, or with leftist civil society, where feminist goals maintain visibility.

11 | CASE STUDY: INCOME SUPPORT FEMINIST RESPONSES

Women in Ireland entered the COVID-19 era in a gendered welfare and tax system and with a male breadwinner activation policy where women were obliged to seek full-time work with no care exceptions or accommodations (M. P. Murphy, 2019). Feminist campaigns before COVID-19 had largely focused on single-issue campaigns relating to austerity era cuts and conditionality's in lone parents income supports, access to labor market supports, and cuts to pension coverage for older women (NWC, 2018). However, NWC had also invested, over 2 decades in a feminist analysis of social welfare, activation and pension policy that provided continuity in framing responses to COVID-19 (NWC, 2019).

The Irish government crisis response reflected Geldof's (2018) "political grammar" in that it used a "politics of address" that differentiated entitlements to pre and post COVID-19 claimants, restricting many women previously depending on state payments to lower levels of income support. Government constructed hierarchies of deservedness to legitimize the differentiation between longer term pre-pandemic unemployed, dependent "adults" (mostly women assessed as a household dependent) and more generous income supports for those who lost jobs or income as a result of COVID-19. The two main responses the Temporary Work Subsidy Scheme (TWSS)¹⁷ and a Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP)¹⁸ are worth at least 40% more than the mainstream gendered welfare payment. The immediate issue generating feminist response was lack of access to the TWSS for women ending their period of maternity benefit. A defensive campaign to ensure women on maternity benefit were included in the TWSS was also an opportunity to highlight the reality of gender blind policy making. Eleven thousand five hundred women ceased receiving maternity benefit between March and the end of May, and only those with employer top ups could access TWSS, others were left with no payment, and with no continuity in the relationship with their employer (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP), 2020). NWCi initiated an e-action campaign that drew on testimony from individual new mothers and sought parliamentarian's support to extend payments to women exiting maternity leave.¹⁹

NWCi proactively sought the support of Trade Unions²⁰ and encouraged the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) to seek legal opinion and to contest governmental framing. The government narrative was that extending payments would require legislative changes. NWCi also commissioned their own legal opinion. The IHREC legal opinion of May 28th, 2020 confirmed that the state "excluding women returning to work after maternity leave from the TWSS is contrary to the State's obligations under EU law," the government's response resulted in women's access to the TWSS. Accessing legal opinion is a relatively rare strategy and points to an increased range of feminist responses and strategies.

Offensive attempts were also made to advance gendered transformation of welfare payments. COVID-19 era payments had generated unintentionally positive gendered possibilities—the PUP was administered as an individualized payment with no household or childcare assessment. The NWCi seized upon this to argue for an individualization of income support (NWCi webinar, May 18th, 2020), and to claim individualization as a feminist principle to guide income policy in their Pre Budget Submission. Women accessing individual PUP stand to lose most in a return to a household means tested payment, where eligibility does not take account of part-time work and care. This return to "normal" may reinforce traditional care roles, meaning that unemployed women in the short term will respond to care and domestic needs with "economic inactivity." This is especially likely if they face additional care work in the context of only partial return of children to childcare and education. An offensive NWCi strategy embedded in previously mentioned webinars "the Feminist Agenda" sought to frame how a post pandemic future could better reconcile care obligations, individualize income and promote women's economic independence.²¹ Mothers were profiled again albeit in terms of moral rationality and feminized constructs were used to communicate gendered effects of income supports, yet the underlying narrative looked to secure the feminist goal of social transformation by breaking with the male breadwinner model.

12 | DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: FEMINIZED NOT FEMINIST

Austerity had profound impacts on the domestic violence (DV) sector, organizations absorbed cuts of up to 40% in core funding with consequences for capacity to outreach generally and to ethnic minority women in particular (Dublin Rape Crisis Centre [DRCC], 2019). Chronic underfunding of the DV sector was assessed to have led to a fracturing of the sector that led to competition between organizations (Benson, 2020; Murphy, Maher, & Irwin, 2020). Austerity had in turn worsened a housing and homelessness crisis in Ireland with gendered implications especially for those experiencing domestic violence (Mayock & Betherton, 2017).

framing across all cases. We find strong attempts to frame care outside of marketized rationales and to frame income support outside of familial male breadwinner welfare regimes. A feminist narrative is used to frame a public childcare model childcare as an essential public service. Other campaigns harnessed discursive public support for "frontline workers" to demand a reevaluation of their status and pay. There is evidence of connective tissue in temporal links with and learnings from previous campaigns, including austerity era analysis, connections across thematic issues and attempts to connect lived experiences of different groups of women. Pro-active alliance building is also evident both within and across sectors in ways that maintain greater visibility of feminist framing than during the austerity era. We observe different degrees of ambition for social transformation, with aspirations for a state-led care infrastructure strongest, the desire for individualized welfare payments more weakly articulated and within DV, a less transformative claim for extra resources. There is evidence of creative innovation across different fields (policy, legal, and social media) and overall we see a greater degree of intersectionality in analysis and outreach than during austerity.

Feminist responses during austerity were reactive, defensive, and often featured as a minor player in larger anti-austerity actions. During the pandemic, NWC1 allied campaigns retain core feminist demands centering care and a feminist political economy captured in the slogan "feminist agenda." This suggests feminist actors are more independent, perhaps stronger, and more able to frame their own engagement. Our analysis suggests feminist responses to the pandemic are then more innovative, inclusive and independent. It is possible that lessons learned from the successful abortion campaign in 2018, alongside the extreme circumstances of COVID-19 afforded a reframing of issues previously considered either private matters, or best dealt with by the market, or to be of low political capital to those which resonated with the public and required political action.

State response to these campaigns, including extending income supports and housing for victims of DV, required sustained pressure from feminist actors. These gains were hard won but indicate the capacity of feminist actors to move quickly and strategically in a crisis environment to respond to women's needs. While, on the other hand, we see continuing reliance on maternalist frameworks, this is accompanied by more visible feminist narratives. Feminist framing was accompanied in our case studies with elements of feminized discourse of hard-pressed self-sacrificing care workers and vulnerable new mothers or victims of DV that engendered political and public support in ways that challenged political grammar and masculinist rationalist logic of crisis management. However, extreme vulnerability may seem tied to exceptional circumstances rather than as a feature of what austerity revealed in how women are consistently positioned as scapegoats and safety valves for crises (Cullen & Murphy, 2018). Nonetheless, the state's rapid response to release funds to support emergency measures for vulnerable women indicates a capacity to divert resources to contexts of extreme need. This suggests an opportunity to responsible the state to shift policy priorities, extend, and increase resources for marginalized women and women's organizations.

14 | CONCLUSION

Feminist responses to crises over the previous decade, have evolved from austerity era strategies with problematically narrow vectors, limited visibility to COVID-19 responses characterized by more independent, inclusive, and innovative strategies that emphasized the connective tissue between issues and diverse women to seek socially transformative outcomes. Feminist theory contributed to the development of our methodology and our analysis of the three case studies. Manne's (2019) concept of patriarchy affords a contextualization of structures and narratives of male entitlement that require feminine coded care. Feminist actors countered dominant discourse of "we are all in this together" that obscured issues with social reproduction, by targeting the plight of specific groups of women to highlight the gendered effects of pandemic.

Narratives of the sacrificial female front line worker and applause for women's care work, features of pandemic "political grammar," were rejected by some female protagonists who observed how the state applauded but then

abandoned them to deal with childcare on their own (JNMO, 2020). However, in their campaigns, women's organizations also relied on feminized constructs of maternal vulnerability and valorization of care labor that may create risks in reaffirming aspects of such feminine coding. More traditional gender relations have often been normalized again after crises are over (Kaufman & Williams, 2017, p. 3). This raises the question of whether problematic gender stereotypes have been reinforced during the pandemic.

Branicki's (2020) use of Gilligan's (1993) ethic of care to present feminist alternatives to crisis management, enabled us to conceptualize how feminist framing can open up space for social transformation. The feminist insistence on the tissues of connection across time, policies and people's relationships and responsibilities allows us to see alternative ways of understanding what is possible beyond the calculative and narrow rationality of neo liberalism. Drawing on case studies of feminist response to COVID-19, crisis management in Ireland allows us to assess empirically whether such responses indicate continuity or change with previous crises. Feminist actors have illustrated innovation in technological communication, and agile campaigning on live issues embedded in long time assessments of deficits in public services and gendered penalties of care work. Allied campaigns featured but, in contrast to austerity era collaborations, feminist messaging maintained a stronger footing suggesting a degree of independence. Feminized or maternalist narratives evident in austerity era mobilizations reemerged in pandemic campaigns, albeit often accompanied by feminist argumentation. Narratives of lone parents, working mothers, carers and nurses, women on maternity leave, and victims of DV illustrate the connective tissue of gender, care labor and vulnerability demonstrating a more intersectional focus. A reliance on narrative that communicated the unprecedented nature of the pandemic rallied public interest and state support, but at times eclipsed other efforts to emphasize COVID-19 as revelatory of "the crisis that has been with us."

COVID-19 has made clear that where change is needed states previously mired in cognitive lock and path dependent policy making can act in nimble and innovative ways to compensate for crisis. This puts social transformation firmly on the agenda in contrast with slow pace of gendered social change, which only happens under sustained feminist pressure. The question is whether post pandemic, feminists can continue to counter narratives and framing of crises that pivot toward normalization.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The NWC was renamed the National Women's Council (NWC) in September 2020.
- ² <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/oncall/>
- ³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/ba4e3d-covid-19-ireland-launches-the-community-call-in-major-nation-wide-vol/>
- ⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/together/>
- ⁵ <https://pace.coe.int/en/pages/committee-29/AS-EGA>
- ⁶ https://us02web.zoom.us/join/register/WN_WChr3ay3SC-UpQMx6l8ARQ
- ⁷ <https://www.thejournal.ie/respice-care-covid-19-pandemic-5083580-May2020/>
- ⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/29/we-are-losers-in-this-crisis-research-finds-lockdowns-reinforcing-gender-inequality>
- ⁹ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/coronavirus-single-parents-concerned-at-treatment-in-supermarkets-1.4231719>
- ¹⁰ <https://nwc.us6.list-manage.com/track/click?u=41d5c226681a37a683dd5dc456ad-633ff343e16e-1057ea3079>

- ¹¹ https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=335198147446160&utm_source=NWC%20Emails&utm_campaign=d1e17aa9fc-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_07_02_10_52&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6dd5d31c23-d1e17aa9fc-783402376mc_cid=d1e17aa9fc&mc_eid=f057ea3079
- ¹² <https://www.nwci.ie/learn/articles/setting-the-feminist-agenda-for-the-economy>
- ¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/MaternityLeaveExtension2020/@MaternityLeaveExtension2020>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/key-health-workers-calling-in-sick-to-visit-their-children-siptu-14228578>
- ¹⁵ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/nurses-using-annual-leave-to-cover-childcare-inmo-says-14286235>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/ireland-s-health-workers-have-world-s-highest-rate-of-covid-19-committee-hears-14286233>
- ¹⁷ TWSS enables employers to receive significant supports if they continue to directly pay the employee through the payroll system.
- ¹⁸ The Pandemic Unemployment Payment is a Covid-19 welfare payment of €350 per week paid to all workers who lost employment as a direct result of Covid-19, more than 38% of the 579,400 people in receipt of the payment received more in the PUP than they had earned in their pre Covid-19 employment.
- ¹⁹ <https://www.thejournal.ie/maternity-leave-exclusion-interview-5104430-May2020/>
- ²⁰ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/women-made-unemployed-after-maternity-leave-due-to-denial-of-wage-subsidy-unions-14256355>
- ²¹ https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=335198147446160&utm_source=NWC%20Emails&utm_campaign=d1e17aa9fc-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_07_02_10_52&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6dd5d31c23-d1e17aa9fc-783402376mc_cid=d1e17aa9fc&mc_eid=f057ea3079
- ²² <https://www.stillhere.ie/>
- ²³ <https://www.thejournal.ie/domestic-violence-covid-19-lockdown-5112252-Jun2020/>
- ²⁴ https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=1165762117091015&utm_source=NWC%20Emails&utm_campaign=d1e17aa9fc-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_07_02_10_52&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6dd5d31c23-d1e17aa9fc-783402376mc_cid=d1e17aa9fc&mc_eid=f057ea3079
- ²⁵ https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=1165762117091015&utm_source=NWC%20Emails&utm_campaign=d1e17aa9fc-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_07_02_10_52&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6dd5d31c23-d1e17aa9fc-783402376mc_cid=d1e17aa9fc&mc_eid=f057ea3079
- ²⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/44b3b-minister-doherty-eases-access-to-rent-supplement-for-victims-of-domestic-violence/>

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