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Philip Alston,
United Nations Special Rapporteur
on extreme poverty and human rights
srextremepoverty@ohchr.org

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Security: Not sensitive, private or confidential

Re: Your visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Dear Mr Alston,

I'm writing to you today regarding your upcoming country visit to the United Kingdom later this year with respect to your role as Special Rapporteur. I represent *TransgenderNI*, a human rights NGO based in Northern Ireland, specialising in advocating for the human and civil rights for transgender persons in the region. I was also part of a delegation of 23 activists and scholars from 17 countries to the second annual *UN Trans Advocacy Week*ⁱ earlier this year in Geneva, where we engaged with many of the UN Special Procedures in relation to specific issues of trans human rights.

As you know, Northern Ireland is a part of the UK that's currently in the spotlight with respect to poverty, security and human rights with respect to Brexit, and suffers on an ongoing basis in relation to our status as a deeply-divided, post-conflict society with associated poverty, intergenerational trauma and mental health issues.

In the following paragraphs I outline some of the experiences of transgender persons and their families in Northern Ireland in relation to poverty, and the associated socioeconomic issues. These issues are documented by both academic research and the experience of several local experts in the field through work with many hundreds of trans individuals and their families across the last few years.

Community experiences of poverty

The trans community in Northern Ireland, as across much of the rest of the world, experiences disproportionate levels of poverty and its associated injustices due to multiple factors. Starting early in life, trans children often experience bullying, harassment and institutional discrimination at school, leading to high levels of temporary and permanent drop-out, mental health issues and social isolation. This can also be matched with difficulties

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accessing educational qualification records, identification for job seeking purposes and other personal documents due to errors, miscommunications and transphobia within the civil service, public authorities and other regulators. For example, someone with photographic identification that does not match their appearance, but who can't update their ID due to a lack of funds, may face significant issues accessing employment or benefits.

These issues, combined with hiring discrimination, dissolution of “zero-hours contracts” upon trans individuals coming out, and discrimination from the general public while working, mean that trans people experience more significant un- and underemployment than the general population. Northern Ireland is a socially conservative place compared to the Republic of Ireland or Great Britain, and this means that outside of the main towns and cities, trans individuals in many fields may feel unable to safely work.

Mental health issues within the trans community are well understood as being serious and chronic for many. Due to the way trans people access medical transition services like hormone replacement therapy and surgery, trans people are forced to “out” themselves to everyone in their lives, and to comply with outdated gender stereotypes in order to access basic healthcare. This often leads to people experiencing more anxiety and hate crime than they would if they came out later, which we find regularly leads to people falling out of employment and into out-of-work benefits.

Safety

The trans community disproportionately works in the fields of sex work, sometimes due to the lack of other viable options for employment, especially in the first few years after individuals come out. Due to the “Nordic Model” being enacted in Northern Ireland through the *Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015*ⁱⁱ in recent years, where sex workers themselves are not criminalised directly but their clients are, leading to more dangerous working conditions for sex workers, trans sex workers now experience heightened levels of violence, robbery and serious assault. This has been seen particularly strongly by experiences in 2017 and 2018 in Dublin in the Republic of Ireland.ⁱⁱⁱ

Trans individuals are also more likely to use drugs, both legal and illegal, than the general population. Due to control of the drugs trade by loyalist and republican paramilitaries across Northern Ireland, drug users, and in particular injecting drug users, often find themselves further impoverished and brutalised by local paramilitary violence, intimidation and debt collection. This is particularly true for drug users who are also otherwise from a marginalised or minority community.

Disability

As extensively documented by the Committee on the Rights of People with Disabilities in respect to the UK's disability rights situation in particular, the experiences of ill and disabled people can be described as “a human catastrophe”.^{iv} This affects the trans community in particular, which for complex reasons experiences an overrepresentation of chronic mental health problems, physical illness, developmental disability and indeed disability in general. Many of the worst experiences of disabled people in the UK currently are due to austerity

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measures meaning disabled people end up in poverty or destitution; this combines with institutional and cultural barriers to doubly discriminate against trans disabled people.

Health and social care

One of the most quickly growing problems in Northern Ireland is the capacity of the health & social care system, which is separate but similar to the NHS in Great Britain. Continued centralisation of services, cutting of capacity and a lack of new service provision is causing significant issues both in specialist care and within general practice.

For trans people, the Regional Gender Identity Service^v has seen waiting lists essentially freeze for most of 2018, which is resulting in incredible suffering for poorer community members. Those who can afford it can skip waiting list by paying for private treatment, but the least able to pay often are left to flounder the longest. Similarly, within general practitioners, trans people's basic healthcare like hormonal treatment and blood tests are not covered by GP contracts, meaning trans individuals are denied access to basic healthcare, leading to risky self-medication, or dangerous debt from private care.

Legal gender recognition

The Regional Gender Identity Service is also responsible for writing reports for trans individuals seeking to access their civil right to legal gender recognition (LGR). Since the Gender Recognition Panel in the UK requires medical input, trans people cannot access their rights to private and family life fully without medical agreement, and in recent months the RGIS has moved to refuse to provide any such reports. Again, this is not a problem for those who can afford it, but in rural communities where poverty is more widespread, often the risks to trans individuals from not having access to LGR are much higher, so the denial of reports has real and substantial impacts on their safety and quality of life.

Housing and shelter

Social housing and access to safe and appropriate housing continues to be a major problem in Northern Ireland, and in particular in the trans community. Over 35% of the service users at our individual advocacy service are homeless or have experienced homelessness in the past 12 months, which we see often leading to repercussions to financial stability, and health and wellbeing generally. Housing rights are particularly fragile for trans individuals, who find themselves experiencing discrimination from private landlords and property managers when they come out or are "outed" to them as transgender. Public shelters and temporary housing facilities are poorly prepared to support trans individuals, leading to chronic homelessness for some individuals where it would not be the case for others.

We have unfortunately heard the news of community members dying in recent months and years due to suicide. In all cases we're aware of in the past few years, the individuals were homeless and were self-medicating with illegal drugs as a coping mechanism.

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Brexit

The effects of austerity politics are undoubtedly causing havoc for marginalised people in poverty right across the UK. This is particularly the case in Northern Ireland, and in particular around the border regions. This is expected to get much worse through the Brexit process, as Northern Ireland gets more isolated from the rest of the island and from the rest of the UK, and loses key investment from the European Commission and European Union.

I would encourage you to visit Northern Ireland during your country visit to the UK, and in particular to visit with marginalised communities in the region. We would gladly invite you to the Belfast Trans Resource Centre^{vi}, which is the only trans community centre in the UK & Ireland, to meet with community members and/or human rights defenders in this area of work. I would also invite you to meet with the LGBTQ community generally, especially in relation to social rights issues in the province.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission and please do not hesitate to get in touch anytime via the details on the first page of this letter.

Yours faithfully,



Ellen Murray
Executive Director
TransgenderNI

ⁱ <https://ilga.org/UN-Trans-Advocacy-Week-2018>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2015/2/enacted>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/dramatic-rise-in-attacks-on-sex-workers-since-law-change-1.3208370>

^{iv} https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CRPD/C/GBR/CO/1&Lang=En

^v <http://www.belfasttrust.hscni.net/BrackenburnClinic.htm>

^{vi} <http://belfasttrans.org.uk>

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