

Harry Connolly, Chair and Kevin Gamble, CEO
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23rd July 2026

Dear Mr Connolly and Mr Gamble,

We were shocked and disappointed to hear that Féile an Phobail had decided to cancel the **Respect, Rights and Reality** event planned by the Women's Rights Network (WRN) Northern Ireland for 4th August 2026, following an organised online reputation attack.

This was an act of **unlawful belief discrimination** against WRN, Sex Matters, our colleague Fiona McAnena and the other women invited to speak, as well as members of the public in West Belfast who share their beliefs.

Anti-discrimination law protects groups that are disparaged by those who are prejudiced against them, including because of their beliefs. The law penalises employers and service providers who act on those prejudices.

In recent years people who hold ordinary beliefs about the fact that there are two sexes, and that it is important to recognise this in order to safeguard women's rights, children's rights, gay and lesbian rights and the human rights of those who identify as transgender, have become vulnerable to such discrimination, despite the fact that their beliefs reflect reality, the law and majority opinion.

We urge you to reinstate the event on women's rights and to apologise to the organisers and speakers. We do not wish to take legal action, but we will if necessary.

The facts

Féile an Phobail is a charity registered in Northern Ireland whose objects are:

*"to promote the benefit of the inhabitants of West Belfast and its environs (hereinafter described as "the area of benefit") without distinction of age, sex, race, political, **religious or other opinion**, by associating the statutory authorities, voluntary organisations and inhabitants in a common effort to advance education and to provide facilities in the interests of social welfare for recreation or other leisure-time occupation, with the object of improving the conditions of life for the said inhabitants."*

Sex Matters is a human-rights charity promoting clarity about sex in law, policy and language
sex-matters.org | info@sex-matters.org

WRN NI is a grassroots network of women speaking up for women's and girls' sex-based rights in Northern Ireland, and a chapter of the larger UK-wide organisation, the Women's Rights Network (WRN).

Sex Matters is a charity registered in England and Wales whose objects are to:

1. promote human rights where they relate to biological sex
2. advance education about sex and the law
3. promote the sound administration of the law in relation to sex and equality in the law.

As part of the programme for the annual festival from 25th July to 4th August, an event was planned by WRN NI entitled *Respect, Rights and Reality: Women's voices from Ireland and Europe*, to take place at St Mary's University College. The panel was planned to be hosted by journalist Catherine McGinty, with guests including Fiona McAnena from Sex Matters, Danielle Loughrey from Gaels for Fair Play, Marianne Driessen from Athena Forum and Sorcha Nic Lochlainn from The Countess. WRN Northern Ireland began to promote it on 16th July on social media and announced the guest speakers on 20th July.

There was a wave of targeted opposition online from individuals and groups stereotyping Fiona McAnena, Sex Matters, the other panellists and WRN as "transphobic" and anti-rights. Key players in this included Causeway Pride and Paul Bloomer. As far as we are aware, Féile an Phobail made no efforts to enquire about or verify these accusations before cancelling the event.

On 21st July Féile an Phobail published a statement saying that the event was cancelled and alleging that the event would "*promote campaigns against rights for the Transgender community*". The statement said that Féile an Phobail was withdrawing the event because it "*fully supports the rights of the Transgender community to be treated with equality and respect*". By email to WRN, the organisation said it had discovered "*via social media*" that the event involved a "*panel member that would likely promote campaigns against rights for the trans community*".

Given what we have seen of a social-media pile-on directed against Fiona McAnena, we believe that she is the panel member to whom you refer. Fiona is director of campaigns at Sex Matters.

This discriminatory action by Féile an Phobail exposes the speakers and the organisations to further prejudice, discrimination and hostility.

Our values

To be clear: Sex Matters and WRN fully support the human rights of all people, and their right to protection from discrimination and harassment in line with relevant legislation, including the Equality Act 2010 and the corresponding equality framework in Northern Ireland. The Charity Commission of England and Wales recognises Sex Matters as a human-rights charity acting in the public interest. Sex Matters was identified by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland ("ECNI") as an interested party in respect of the implementation in Northern Ireland of the Supreme Court judgment in the case of *For Women Scotland v The Scottish Ministers*. The High Court of Justice has also granted Sex Matters leave to intervene in judicial review proceedings involving the ECNI, WRN and others in respect of the implementation.

It is prejudicial and discriminatory for Féile an Phobail to join in with the online attacks and to smear WRN, Sex Matters and the panellists as "*campaigning against the rights of the trans*

community” and as being inconsistent with “*fully supporting the rights of the Transgender community to be treated with equality and respect*”.

The law

The *Fair Employment & Treatment (NI) Order 1998 (FETO)* provides at Article 3:

- (1) In this Order “discrimination” means—
 - (a) discrimination on the ground of religious belief or political opinion; or
 - (b) discrimination by way of victimisation.

Article 2 (Interpretation) of FETO contains general interpretive provisions. It states:

- (3) In this Order references to a person’s religious belief or political opinion include references to—
 - (a) his supposed religious belief or political opinion; and
 - (b) the absence or supposed absence of any, or any particular, religious belief or political opinion.
- (4) In this Order any reference to a person’s political opinion does not include an opinion which consists of or includes approval or acceptance of the use of violence for political ends connected with the affairs of Northern Ireland, including the use of violence for the purpose of putting the public or any section of the public in fear.

The order includes **Discrimination in provision of goods, facilities or services** at Article 28:

- (1) It is unlawful for any person concerned with the provision (for payment or not) of goods, facilities or services to the public or a section of the public to discriminate against a person who seeks to obtain or use those goods, facilities or services—
 - (a) by refusing or deliberately omitting to provide him with any of them; or
 - (b) by refusing or deliberately omitting to provide him with goods, facilities or services of the same quality, in the same manner and on the same terms as are normal in his case in relation to other members of the public or (where the person so seeking belongs to a section of the public) to other members of that section.

In the *Matter of an Application by the Northern Ireland Electricity Service (1987) NI 271* the words “on the ground of religious belief or political opinion” were identified as being:

“capable in their own or ordinary meaning of covering any cause or reason for an action based on religious belief or political opinion, whether it is the belief or opinion of the person affected by the action or of the person doing the act or of another person.”

In the case of *McKay v Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (1994) NI 103*, the term “political opinion” was found to mean (non-exhaustively):

“an opinion relating to the policy of government matters touching the government of the state. The word ‘political’ is defined in the Shorter Oxford Dictionary as: Of, belonging or pertaining to the state, its government policy; public, civil; of or pertaining to the science or art of

government.”

The meaning and scope of religion and belief protection derive from Articles 9 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR). It is generally accepted that “religious belief or political opinion” protection in Northern Ireland also includes non-religious philosophical beliefs. As NI Direct says:

“Philosophical belief covers other beliefs about weighty and large aspects of human life and behaviour.”

It is well established that beliefs that have the potential to “offend, shock or disturb” are covered by protections against belief discrimination.

Case law related to belief discrimination in the Equality Act (2010), including *Forstater v CGDE [2021]*, has established that statements of belief to the following effect, among others, are protected against belief discrimination and do not destroy the rights of others:

- (a) that, as a matter of scientific fact, sex is biologically immutable
- (b) that there are only two sexes
- (c) that it is impossible to change sex
- (d) that sex matters – in particular it is important to be able to talk about sex in order to take action against the discrimination, violence and oppression that still affect women and girls because they were born female
- (e) that male individuals who identify as “trans women” are and remain men
- (f) that female individuals who identify as “trans men” are and remain women.

These beliefs are sometimes termed **“gender critical”**. They have been found NOT to be incompatible with the human rights of trans-identifying individuals. Case law on the scope of belief in relation to the Equality Act 2010 is likely to be highly persuasive to the scope of religious and political beliefs in Northern Ireland.

It has been established by case law that direct discrimination in relation to belief also includes discriminatory action in response to **“manifestation”** of a protected philosophical belief, such as expressing the belief in public. Direct discrimination includes **“stereotyping”** in the context of belief. This refers to a decision-maker taking action based on a stereotype that persons who hold or manifest a belief share attributes of a group that they might not in fact possess, for example that individuals expressing so called “gender critical” beliefs are likely to undertake unlawful harassment or discrimination against people based on the protected characteristic of gender reassignment, or to deny those people’s human rights.

In cancelling the *Respect, Rights and Reality* event, Féile an Phobail has acted in a manner that runs contrary to its obligations under the FETO not to discriminate against because of belief.

For as long as you do not reinstate the event, this is a continuing act of discrimination.

WRN, Sex Matters, Fiona McAnena and the other speakers, as well as any member of the local population served by the charity, have a number of remedies open to them. These include a declaration that the action by Féile an Phobail is discriminatory and unlawful, reinstatement of the event, damages and a public apology.

You and the other individuals who have directed this discrimination should be aware of Article 35 **incitement and accessories**, which provides that:

(1) Any person who—

- (a) knowingly aids or incites; or
- (b) directs, procures or induces,

another to do an act which is unlawful by virtue of any provision of Part III or IV or Article 34 shall be treated for the purposes of this Order as if he, as well as that other, had done that act.

(2) For the purposes of paragraph (1) an employee or agent for whose act the employer or principal is liable under Article 36 (or would be so liable but for Article 36(4)) shall be taken to have aided the employer or principal to do the act.

(3) A person does not under this Article knowingly aid another to do an unlawful act if—

- (a) he acts in reliance on a statement made to him by that other person that, by reason of any provision of this Order, the act which he aids would not be unlawful; and
- (b) it is reasonable for him to rely on the statement.

(4) A person who knowingly or recklessly makes a statement such as is referred to in paragraph (3)(a) which in a material respect is false or misleading shall be guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale.

(5) An inducement consisting of an offer of benefit or a threat of detriment is not prevented from falling within paragraph (1) because the offer or threat was not made directly to the person in question.

We are writing to request that the event be immediately reinstated and offered with the same quality, in the same manner and on the same terms as are normal for other groups, and that a public statement of apology is made.

Given the urgency to resolve this in order for the event to go ahead, we request a response to this letter by 4pm on Friday July 24th. Following this we will be instructing lawyers and incurring costs in relation to organisational and individual respondents. If the event is not reinstated we will also be pursuing legal advice in relation to the liability of Causeway Pride, Paul Bloomer and any others implicated in inducing this discrimination.

Yours sincerely



Maya Forstater
CEO