

WOMEN'S MANIFESTO


Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 2016



WOMEN'S POLICY GROUP

Introduction

The Women's Policy Group is comprised of a wide range of women's organisations, individuals and trade unions working for a society where women and girls can fully realise their rights. This feminist manifesto sets out measures on a number of important gender equality issues that, with political will, can be taken forward over the next Assembly term. The issues raised reflect the diversity of women in Northern Ireland across age, social class, life experience, racial and ethnic background, sexual orientation, disability and political and religious belief.



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Economic Justice Pillar

Women's Employment and the Gender Pay Gap

Women's employment is characterised by gender segregated labour-markets, gender gaps in pay, higher levels of part-time work and a high concentration in low paying and precarious sectors such as caring, cleaning and the service/hospitality industry.

The interruption of women's careers for unpaid care work significantly undermines women's career progression and lifetime earnings, including pension provision.

We call upon the Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Introduce legislation which requires mandatory pay and bonus reporting broken down by gender which includes the sharing of information with employees and trade unions.
- Develop a strategy that addresses the low rates of female entrepreneurship and high rates of economic inactivity experienced by women and establish a Women's Employability and Enterprise fund.
- Tackle age discrimination in employment and increase opportunities for older women workers.
- Support the introduction of the living wage for all.
- Extend the right to request flexible working for all women from day one of employment with all jobs offering flexible working by default by 2020.
- Legislate to ban the use of zero hour contracts and protect against the misuse of low hour and atypical contracts.

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Women, Poverty & Austerity

Systemic issues often see women twice as dependent on social security as men with welfare reform and the wider austerity agenda having a disproportionate impact on women's access to resources, security and safety.

We call upon the Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Implement and adopt a strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation on the basis of objective need.
- Consider options to increase revenue by utilising the fiscal powers available to the Northern Ireland Executive.
- Strengthen gender equality of outcomes across all public expenditure and government departments by progressing towards gender responsive budgeting.
- Promote equality in procurement including that linked to the reduction in corporation tax and how this impacts on women.
- Protect and provide financial guidance and support as women approach retirement, particularly as the age of qualification for state pensions rises.

Women and Childcare

As compared to men, women in Northern Ireland continue to disproportionately undertake the role of unpaid primary carer within households. Access to affordable and appropriate childcare provision, which properly fulfils the diverse needs of children, remains of fundamental importance in both facilitating women's participation in the labour market, education and training and progressing gender equality in paid and unpaid work.

We call upon the Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Develop a childcare strategy that delivers adequate, accessible and affordable childcare which accommodates all working patterns.
- Test the benefits to children, families, the economy and society of free childcare.
- Address the chronic undersupply of childcare provision for low income households, particularly vulnerable families, therein sustaining the at-risk Women's Centre Childcare Fund (currently supported by the Department for Social Development).
- Address the wider gender equality implications of the continued undervaluing of unpaid care work within policy development, including the Programme for Government and in the Gender Equality Strategy.
- Promote carer-friendly employer policies across all sectors.

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Social Justice Pillar

Violence Against Women

In 2014-15, the PSNI responded to 28,287 domestic violence incidents, one every 19 minutes of every day. 2,734 sexual offences were reported to police, including 737 offences of rape. The vast majority of victims were women. Despite these figures, domestic and sexual violence continue to be under-reported and prosecutions remain low. To effectively tackle violence against women, coordinated action from government is required, including preventative measures, early intervention and protection, victim-centred justice and addressing the lack of services and barriers faced by women who experience multiple inequalities such as disabled, lesbian, bisexual and transgender women.

We call on the Northern Ireland Executive to:

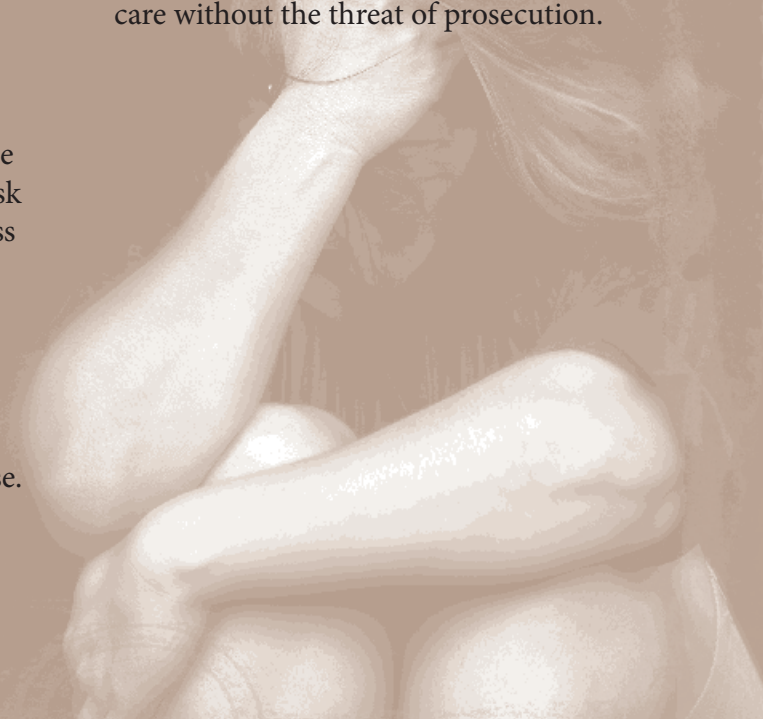
- Commit to preserve vital Women's Aid refuges, floating support/outreach and children's support services for women and children affected by domestic and sexual violence.
- Introduce Women's Aid Justice Support Workers in all police districts to provide tailored support for domestic violence victims throughout the criminal justice process.
- Roll out the non-court mandated perpetrator programme in all Trust areas on a permanent basis, to tackle the abusive behaviours of domestic violence perpetrators.
- Introduce Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs) to the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) process to advocate for and support high-risk victims of domestic violence.
- Establish an independently constituted inquiry on sexual and domestic violence during the conflict in Northern Ireland to give a voice to those who suffered this abuse.

Women & Reproductive Health

The availability and access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services are crucial to women's health and well-being. We believe that free, non-directive sexual and reproductive healthcare should be made available to all women who wish to avail of it.

We call upon the Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Ensure Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is standardised, starts early, is relevant to pupils at each stage of their development and maturity and is taught by people who are trained and confident in talking about the course content.
- Set up an unrestricted fund specifically for organisations who offer contraception and non-directive information.
- Extend sexual and reproductive healthcare services across Northern Ireland to ensure equal access for all women, particularly those in rural areas.
- Ensure policy making decisions around reproductive healthcare issues are evidence-informed.
- De-criminalise abortion in line with international human rights standards so that health professionals can provide such care without the threat of prosecution.



Women, Education & Training

The extent to which women feel prepared to participate in education and training depends on a number of factors including childcare, transport and cost. Women's organisations offer community education which attempts to address these barriers particularly for women from disadvantaged and rural areas.

We call upon the Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Establish a fund to address the disproportionate cuts to the women's sector community education.
- Reinstate the higher training levels and accept equivalent qualifications for tutors under the European Social Fund (ESF) programme for the community-based women's sector.
- Create targets for apprenticeships to ensure a gender balance.
- Establish guidelines for non-gendered careers advice which takes account of all possible routes for individual young women to pursue.

Women in Politics, Public Life & Decision Making

Despite the commitments in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement on increasing the representation of women in political and public life, current statistics show that, in the main, women are still absent from the senior decision making bodies in Northern Ireland. In its Report on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly (February 2015), the Assembly and Executive Review Committee concluded that the under representation of women in politics in Northern Ireland is a serious issue which must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

We call upon the Northern Ireland Executive to set out the steps it will take to address the above and recommend that these include the following:

- Special temporary measures.
- Revising selection procedures by ensuring that at least one woman is selected for every constituency.
- Equitable placement of men and women in winnable seats.
- Capacity development to strengthen the skills and resources of women in the pipeline for elected office.
- Co-opting women into vacant seats.

As a means to address the under-representation of women as Chairs and Deputy Chairs of Public Bodies, the Executive and its Ministers should ensure gender balance when making public appointments to these posts.

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Cultural Pillar

Women and Girls in the Media

Women and Girls are routinely subjected to sexism in the mainstream media. Sexualised imagery of women and girls across all media platforms is so commonplace that it is becoming widely accepted and is no longer seen as an equality issue.

We call upon the Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Create a task force to monitor and address the issue of gender stereotyping, objectification and sexualisation of women and girls in all media platforms.

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Equality Pillar

Legislative Framework

The Northern Ireland Executive is bound by international human rights obligations as well as the human rights and equality principles set out in the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

We call on the Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Incorporate the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) into domestic law which will allow for stronger protection for women.
- Incorporate the pillars of all the UN Security Council Resolutions including 1325 Women, Peace and Security to address not only the inordinate impact of conflict on women, but also the pivotal role women should and do play in conflict management, conflict resolution and sustainable peace.
- Consider every international human rights convention across all policy decisions in order to protect women in all their multiple identities.
- Develop and implement the Gender Equality Strategy – including through: action plans, monitoring, review, data and gender impact assessment.
- Ensure that statutory bodies and NGOs that work for gender equality are supported and resourced.

Transgender Women

We believe all transgender women should enjoy the same rights as others.

We call upon the Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Demonstrate that transgender women are equal citizens with equal rights.
- Encourage diverse, representative, realistic and positive portrayals of transgender women.
- Draw up a clearly defined treatment pathway to transition for transgender individuals.

Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual Women

Due to high levels of invisibility and marginalisation, lesbian and bisexual women and their children face barriers in accessing the most basic goods, facilities and services in everyday life.

We call upon the Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Implement a robust Sexual Orientation Strategy in line with international obligations including the Yogyakarta Principles.
- Introduce civil marriage equality in line with the rest of the United Kingdom.
- Introduce relationship and sexuality education that includes lesbian, gay and bisexual issues in teacher training colleges.
- Ensure health services meet the needs of lesbian and bisexual women particularly in relation to the practice of safe sex.
- Ensure lesbian and bisexual women have equal access to health services including fertility treatment.



Women with Disabilities

Women and girls with disabilities can be subject to discrimination on two levels; marginalised on account of their disability and on their gender. The Government needs to recognise and implement the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) effectively within Northern Ireland to ensure that women with disabilities live in an equal society which is free from economic, social and cultural barriers.

We call upon the Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Ensure that programmes and policies dealing with the elimination of exploitation, violence and abuse contain specific actions for women with disabilities.
- Urgently address the issue of women with disabilities being denied the same access to maternal health services including sexual and reproductive health as other women.
- Promote the employment of women with disabilities in all sectors, and support entrepreneurship development.
- Introduce staff education programmes, based on the social model of disability, to effect attitudinal change in all sectors but particularly health and education sectors.

Black, Minority, Ethnic Women, Women seeking Asylum, Women Refugees

Inequality and exclusion from economic, cultural and political spheres are among some of the key challenges facing women from BME communities, women seeking asylum and women refugees.

We call upon the Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Develop, adopt and implement a Racial Equality Strategy with targets and monitoring procedures in consultation with minority ethnic groups.
- Provide adequate long term core funding for BME, asylum and refugee support groups.
- Designate English Speaker for Other Languages (ESOL) as an essential skill, increase free English speaking classes and address the barriers faced by women in attending these classes.
- Ensure gender equality for BME, asylum seeking and refugee women in access to social protection, including work with the Home Office to increase the National Asylum Support Service benefit to at least 70% of Job Seekers Allowance and to provide access to disability-related benefits.

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Older Women

Older women are often overlooked in many strategic policy initiatives. Older women have the right to live as equal and engaged citizens, and to have full enjoyment and protection of their rights.

We call upon the Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Reform the adult social care framework and protect and fully resource the NHS to ensure that women can live in dignity at all stages of their lives, including in older life.
- Ensure robust and responsive inspections and minimum standards in all care settings.
- Extend the Warm Homes discount to Northern Ireland.
- Implement age discrimination legislation on the provision of goods, facilities and services.

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The issues raised reflect the diversity of women in Northern Ireland. The interruption of women's careers for unpaid care work significantly undermines women's career progression. ...women in Northern Ireland continue to disproportionately undertake the role of unpaid primary carer within households.

The availability and access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services are crucial to women's health and well-being.

We believe all transgender women should enjoy the same rights as others.

The Government needs to recognise and implement the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The extent to which women feel prepared to participate in education and training depends on a number of factors including childcare, transport and cost.

This manifesto has been written by the Women's Policy Group.
This publication has received support from the organisations listed below.

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