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Women's Resource and Development Agency

Response to Department of Finance Budget Engagement

Dear Minister Murphy,

Introduction:

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) has a membership of 300+ regionally representing a diverse range of women across all of Northern Ireland. We believe it was fitting that we submit a response to this limited notice, pre-budget engagement exercise. WRDA is a membership organisation and represents women at a local and international level and has a diverse membership including grassroots campaigns, community based women's groups, individuals, women's organisations, women's centres, national organisations and trade unions.

We also work with six other leading women's organisations in the Women's Regional Consortium to give a voice to women in disadvantaged and rural areas. WRDA staff are represented on a range of boards and organisations promoting a gender perspective including, but not limited to, areas of **Policy, Advocacy and Budgeting** through Women's Policy Group; Women's Budget Group; Rural Women's Policy Forum; Equality Coalition and various All Party Working Groups. We tackle **Health Inequalities**, through representing women on a wide range of Trust Boards and Forums and we represent women through **Leadership and Infrastructure Support** on the NICVA Executive, Government, Community and Voluntary Sector Joint Forum; Boards of NIRWN and NIWEP and more.

What we want the Executive to know:

This response will highlight the barriers women in particular and outline the ways that budget allocation could support and strengthen the women's sector. WRDA is a flexible, adaptable and strategic organisation with links to all other organisations in the women's sector and VCSE sector more generally. We will outline our views on the best approach to developing the budget, through a gender budgeting lens, that will

greatly benefit the women's sector and advancement of gender equality in society at large.

WRDA believes that the significant funding should be established to support women in Northern Ireland. In line with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security principles, a percentage of the funding should automatically be set aside for the women's sector at the outset before the rest of the budget is allocated to relevant departments.

Further, WRDA believes the following:

- Within Northern Ireland, gender neutrality in budgeting, funding and policy-making has detrimentally impacted the lives of women and the capabilities of women's organisations¹.
- Funding programmes are the most direct way for resources to reach those who need them and to impact women's lives and the women's sector in Northern Ireland is the most equipped to do this.
- With direct action to tackling gender inequality and the gender gap across society in Northern Ireland, research shows that this can benefit all of society at large². The pursuit of gender equality should be seen as a part of the solution to addressing gaps in Northern Ireland and not an afterthought once funding distribution models have been decided.
- The barriers the women's sector and women face are historic and systemic. By setting an allocation aside for supporting the women's sector, the Department of Finance would be actively supporting the values of gender budgeting and the UNSCR 1325 Women, Peace and Security principles. This would act as a recognition of the systemic barriers the women's sector faces, as a sector that represents over half of the NI population, and would make a contribution towards providing the sector with the autonomy to build capacity and assist in breaking down some of the barriers that have been embedded against women.
- The women's sector is best placed to reach women on the ground and knows what is needed to dismantle systemic gender discrimination and the Department of Finance should establish a close working relationship with the sector. If funding is allocated directly to the women's sector, and to departments through the approach of gender budgeting, it will embody the above values and principles whilst enabling society to create partnership, efficiency, innovation, collaboration, sustainability, further resilience and the removal of gender inequality.

Through our work across all of Northern Ireland, we have an in-depth knowledge and expertise of the needs of women in Northern Ireland. This has led the strategic aims

¹ For example the impact of Welfare Reform on women: http://www.social-policy.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/16_bennett.pdf

² For evidence see: 'EIGE's research shows that narrowing the gender gap in the EU could result in an extra 10 million jobs and increase in GDP on up to €3.15 trillion by 2050' <https://eige.europa.eu/news/gender-equality-deserves-more-1>

of WRDA and the ongoing work of the Women's Sector Lobbyist. The issues we feel the Executive should know are outlined, in detail, in the [Women's Manifesto](#) and reports we have completed on [Brexit](#), [Gender Inequality in NI](#), [disabled women, childcare](#) and more. We want the Executive to develop an understanding of the issues that matter the most to women in NI outlined as the priorities of WRDA below.

WRDA Priorities:

WRDA's vision is of a fair and equal society where women are empowered and are a visible force for change and influence in all areas of life. We have several priorities areas that are outlined below:

1. Women's Employment

Women's employment in Northern Ireland 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 employment for unpaid care work continues to significantly undermine women's career progression and lifetime earnings, including pension provision³. The current parental leave and flexible working framework is inadequate and this, together with the lack of support for childcare, penalises working parents in general and women in particular.

Discrimination on the grounds of sex is still prevalent, on average more than a fifth of complaints of discrimination received by the Equality Commission are about sex discrimination, of these 21.5% are to do with pregnancy or maternity⁴.

The Department of Finance needs to effectively budget to address the employment issues outlined by WRDA [here](#).

1. Gender Pay Gaps

The Department of Finance needs to budget for a provision to require mandatory pay and bonus reporting is enacted without delay. Further funding needs to be established for a robust Gender Pay and Action plan is also developed, implemented and monitored.

2. Motherhood Gaps and Childcare Provision

Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK without a government-funded childcare provision outside of early year's education. The lack of affordable childcare has led to a large "motherhood gap" in Northern Ireland whereby working mothers are over represented in part-time and temporary employment. Having one or more children

³ Carers UK (2019), 'Will I care? The likelihood of being a carer in adult life':

http://www.carersuk.org/images/News_campaigns/CarersRightsDay_Nov19_FINAL.pdf

⁴ Equality Commission Northern Ireland, (2019), 'Pregnancy and maternity discrimination remains an issue for working mothers', <https://www.equalityni.org/Blog/Articles/August-2019/Pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-remains-an>

reduces women's likelihood of being in a permanent full time job by almost one third, with only 45% of women with dependent children working in a permanent full time job⁵.

The [Childcare for All](#) campaign, which WRDA co-convenes, sets out a [charter](#) on which a childcare provision should be set. Any provision in Northern Ireland needs to focus on gender and look beyond simple parity with England, Scotland and Wales. This provision needs to cover 0-2 year olds alongside 3-4 year old and it is essential that Northern Ireland does not simply replicate the flawed 30-hours systems in GB.

3. Austerity and Poverty

It is estimated that austerity since 2010 will have cost women a total of £79bn, against £13bn for men. It shows that, by 2020, men will have borne just 14% of the total burden of welfare cuts, compared with 86% for women⁶. This is one of the most evident failings of gender-neutral budgeting and funding needs to be provided immediately to undertake a gendered-assessment of welfare reform and to adequately fund mitigations beyond the bedroom tax in Northern Ireland.

4. Fully funded RSE

It is imperative that funding is allocated as a priority to the Department of Education and Department of Health to develop and implement a statutory Relationships and Sex Education programme in Northern Ireland that is fit for purpose. This educational programme needs to be standardised, start 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, in line with CEDAW recommendations. Further, RSE needs to cover consent, sexual harassment, LGBTQIA+ relationships and health issues, abortion and more.

Crucially, this service cannot continue to be provided for my religious groups and funded by public agencies. Given CEDAW recommendations on the matter alongside the shocking domestic violence statistics in Northern Ireland, this needs to be funded as a priority in any forthcoming budget.

5. Fully funded abortion services, perinatal mental health facilities and IVF treatment options

The Department of Finance needs to urgently provide funding to adequately provide for the accessible roll out of abortion services across Northern Ireland that are free, safe, legal and local. In addition, immediate action needs to be taken to provide funding to develop an adequate perinatal mental health service across all of Northern Ireland. In relation to commitments in New Decade, New Approach to extend NHS-funded IVF cycles from one to three (in line with the rest of the UK), funding needs to be allocated to facilitate this immediately. Further, IVF provisions

⁵ TUC, (2016), 'The Motherhood Pay Penalty', <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/MotherhoodPayPenalty.pdf>

⁶ Keen, R., Cracknell, R. (2017), 'Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes', Commons Briefing Papers SN06758, <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06758/SN06758.pdf>

in Northern Ireland need to also be made available to same-sex couple, who cannot currently meet the criteria of trying to conceive naturally for a given time frame nor may they meet the criteria of being diagnosed with a fertility condition.

6. Women's Education and Statutory Supported funded Adult Learning Provisions

Education is a major factor in addressing the marginalisation of women. Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK or Ireland to not have a statutory body to provide Adult Learning services or funding to voluntary organisations who provide this service. Given the drastic cuts faced by the women's sector in 2015, many women's adult learning initiatives are no longer in place. Funding needs to be provided to support the development of an Adult Learning provision in Northern Ireland to address skills shortages and the reduction in services provided to women.

7. Transgender Healthcare and Gender Recognition Reform

The current gender recognition process in Northern Ireland is invasive, expensive, and laden with unnecessary bureaucracy. Any reform to this falls under the remit of the Department of Finance and it is necessary that a budget allocation is made to address this immediately. We support the recommendations from Transgender NI on the process and support trans women through our work.

Anything Department of Finance should be doing differently:

1. Gender Budgeting:

Within the 'New Decade, New Approach' agreement, women are not mentioned once throughout the entire document, despite the vast embedded gender inequality that exists across all sectors in Northern Ireland. To overcome this, the Department of Finance should be leading the way for all departments on adopting Gender-Budgeting, to ensure gender inequality is not exacerbated by ineffective gender-neutral policy-making.

For too long, budgeting and policy-making in Northern Ireland has been "gender-neutral" and the outcome of this has led to the opposite; a disproportionately negative impact on women in Northern Ireland. The clearest example of this is the impact welfare reform has had on women, as outlined above.

2. Examples of the harm of Gender-Neutral Budgeting:

Further examples of the harm gender-neutral budgeting and policy-making within departments includes the Department for Communities decisions to:

- i. Treat the HMRC's employer's allowance (which is available for charities and small businesses) as "double funding" and to recoup the funding from the grants provided by the DfC to charities,
- ii. To not fund more than 3% of employer's pension contributions in grant funding to charities.

Both of the above policy decisions disproportionately impact women, as women make up roughly 71% of the workers that the DfC fund. As a result, women's organisations are losing the employer's allowance, which was designed to support small organisations, and individual women are opting out of pensions as they cannot afford to pay 5% out of their own salaries. Both policies are extremely detrimental to women, especially when considering the employment gaps outlined above and the history of issues relating to women's pensions. Despite this, the DfC equality screening process does not see how this is a gendered issue nor how it will disproportionately impact women.

These are just two examples of "gender-neutral" policy-making and budgetary decisions that highlight the harm this approach can take on women. We suggest that the Department of Finance implements a practice of gender-budgeting and trains all staff on the matter to avoid issues like those above arising, and to enhance the prospect of gender equality.

3. Adopting the pillars of Women, Peace and Security in budgeting:

In addition to all of this, the budgetary decisions on Northern Ireland should be made through embodying the pillar of the UNSCR 1325 Women Peace and Security pillars. The women's sector of Northern Ireland has been working to enhance women's role in peacebuilding, and consequentially positions of leadership more generally, and it is time for the Executive and departments to embrace the pillars of protection, participation and (third one). An example of this would be through ring-fencing a proportion of funding for the women's sector before allocating funding through traditional streams.

4. Training programmes to increase transparency and meaningful engagement:

Another example of good practice from the Department of Finance would be to create a training programme for the women's sector to increase transparency of how the budget is created and distributed. This would ensure that the women's sector could have an increased role in lobbying to meet their needs while simultaneously increasing transparency of the department.

5. Women at the heart of Public Consultations:

We recommend that the Department of Finance, and all other Departments, abides by the recommendations outlined by WRDA in their report on '[Women at the Heart of Public Consultation](#)'. This is particularly significant ahead of any public consultation on the proposed multi-year budget for 2021 onwards. We would be happy to assist the Department on making their future consultations fully accessible to women in Northern Ireland.

If you have any questions or queries on this response, please do not hesitate to get in contact:

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