



Women's **Policy Group NI**

COVID-19 FEMINIST RECOVERY PLAN

July 2020

Abstract

This feminist recovery plan will cover a wide range of evidence on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women and the recommendations to address this from the WPG NI

Contact: Rachel Powell, Women's Sector Lobbyist
rachel.powell@wrda.net

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Women's Policy Group NI

Women's Policy Group NI - COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan

Introduction

This paper has been created by the Women's Policy Group Northern Ireland (WPG).

The WPG is a platform for women working in policy and advocacy roles in different organisations to share their work and speak with a collective voice on key issues. It is made up of women from trade unions, grassroots women's organisations, women's networks, feminist campaigning organisations, LGBT+ organisations, migrant groups, support service providers, NGOs, human rights and equality organisations and individuals. Over the years this important network has ensured there is good communication between politicians, policy makers and women's organisations on the ground. The WPG represents all women of Northern Ireland and we use our group expertise to lobby to influence the development and implementation of policies affecting women.

The WPG is endorsed as a voice that represents all women of Northern Ireland on a policy level. This group has collective expertise on protected characteristics and focus on identifying the intersectional needs of all women. The WPG membership is broad and has a deep understanding of how best to approach the impact COVID-19 is having on women in Northern Ireland. The impact on all protected groups will be severe, and this paper will use evidence of the disproportionate impact the pandemic is having on women to make recommendations to policy-makers.

Special thanks to the Hawaii State Commission on the Status of Women for their Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for COVID-19, which helped to inspire this document.

Please note, not all member organisations of the Women's Policy Group have specific policy positions on all the areas covered throughout this plan. Therefore, individual experts from each of the organisations below contributed to the sections that cover their own areas expertise.

This publication was prepared by:

Rachel Powell (Women's Resource and Development Agency)
 Elaine Crory (Women's Resource and Development Agency)
 Jonna Monaghan (Northern Ireland Women's European Platform)
 Siobhán Harding (Women's Support Network)
 Alexa Moore (Transgender NI)
 Robyn Scott (Committee on the Administration of Justice)
 Eliza Browning (Committee on the Administration of Justice)
 Uná Boyd (Committee on the Administration of Justice)
 Louise Coyle (Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network)
 Clare Moore (Irish Congress of Trade Unions)
 Geraldine Alexander (Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance)
 Helen Flynn (Human Rights Consortium)
 Helen Crickard (Reclaim the Agenda)
 Gráinne Teggart (Amnesty International UK)
 Emma Osbourne (Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland)
 Aisha O'Reilly (Politics Plus)
 Karen Sweeney (Women's Support Network)
 Jacqui McLoughlin (Women's Forum NI)

The content of this paper is supplemented by additional WPG COVID-19 research and the WPG Women's Manifesto 2019 which was written and supported by the following organisations:

Women's Resource and Development Agency
 Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network
 Transgender NI
 Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance
 Irish Congress of Trade Unions Northern Ireland Committee
 Reclaim the Night Belfast
 Committee on the Administration of Justice
 Politics Plus
 Belfast Feminist Network
 HERe NI
 Northern Ireland Women's European Platform
 Reclaim the Agenda
 Alliance for Choice
 Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland
 Women's Support Network
 DemocraShe
 Raise Your Voice

COVID-19 and Gender - Overview

We recognise that some issues highlighted will be of a devolved nature for the Northern Ireland Assembly, others will be issues that require Westminster intervention. This recovery plan will be based on all of the issues impacting women and specific policy recommendations will be made to both the Northern Ireland Assembly on devolved matters and to the UK Government on UK-wide issues.

It is essential that all levels of government representing Northern Ireland are fully aware of the unique challenges in Northern Ireland; particularly as the UK government is the duty bearer for human rights in NI. Women in Northern Ireland have suffered immensely due to a decade of Austerity, and any COVID-19 recovery can not come to the detriment of women's equality and economic well being.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented challenge across the UK. It has put in sharp focus the value and importance of care work, paid and unpaid, and highlighted the essential nature of often precarious and almost always low paid retail work. Women undertake the majority of this work, and women will bear a particular brunt of this crisis; economically, socially and in terms of health. The WPG is calling on decision-makers across the UK to take action to ensure a gender-sensitive crisis response as we transition from crisis response to recovery.

The current crisis affects men and women differently, and in many cases deepens the inequalities women experience on an everyday basis¹. These inequalities, along with key solutions, were highlighted in a Women's Manifesto issued by the WPG in preparation for the general election in December 2019². These solutions remain central for a long-term response, but the developing crisis has put a number of issues in sharp focus for urgent emergency action.

Not only does this crisis have a disproportionate impact on women, but that impact is worsened for women from particular backgrounds: for instance, black and racialised women, disabled women, women with caring responsibilities, and LGBT women. The emergency action required, and any recovery programme put in place, must meaningfully take into consideration the

¹ See Women's Resource and Development Agency Reports on Gender Inequality in NI in 2020 <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Gender-Inequality-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf>; Brexit and the Impact on Women in NI <https://wrda.net/2019/10/18/brexit-and-the-impact-on-women-in-northern-ireland/>; Disabled Women and Discrimination <https://wrda.net/2019/11/18/disabled-women-and-discrimination-facts-we-need-you-to-know/>; Childcare: A Women's Issue <https://www.childcareforallni.com/post/childcare-a-women-s-issue-by-rachel-powell-women-s-sector-lobbyist-at-wrda>.

² Women's Policy Group NI Election Manifesto 2019: <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Women%27sManifesto2019.pdf>

institutionalised inequalities that exist within Northern Ireland, and must co-develop a roadmap forward with the communities affected.

Relevant WPG Research and Publications

The WPG and member organisations have already published several briefings, articles, evidence submissions and reports on the unequal impact COVID-19 is having on Women in Northern Ireland. This has included:

- WPG [briefing](#) for MLAs on COVID-19 and Gender
- WPG [article](#) on the impact of COVID-19 on Women
- WPG and WBG Joint [Statement](#) to DfC on Statutory Maternity Pay, Carer's Allowance and the Two-Child Cap
- WPG [Submission](#) to the Westminster Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry on the Impact of COVID-19 on People with Protected Characteristics
- WPG Domestic Violence and Family Proceedings Bill Evidence [Submission](#) and WRDA Domestic Violence and COVID-19 [Briefing](#)
- WPG [Article](#) on COVID-19 and Gender - NICVA Insights and Impact Series
- WPG [Article](#) on Human Rights Impact of COVID-19 on Women in Just News
- Childcare for All campaign [statement](#) on COVID-19 and Childcare
- Follow-Up Childcare for All campaign [statement](#)

In addition to COVID-19 research, the WPG and member organisations have also published several submissions on gender-equality related issues in the past two years including:

- WPG Hate Crime Legislation Northern Ireland Independent Review Consultation [Response](#)
- WPG UK Government Marriage Equality Consultations Response
- WRDA [Response](#) to Department of Finance Budget Engagement
- WPG [Response](#) to A New Legal Framework for Abortion Services in NI Consultation
- Women's Regional Consortium [Report](#) - Making Ends Meet - Women's Perspectives on Access to Lending
- Women's Regional Consortium [Report](#) - Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives
- Women's Regional Consortium [Report](#) - In Work Poverty
- Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network - Rural Voices Research [Report](#)
- WRDA [Response](#) to Consultation on Dormant Bank Accounts in Northern Ireland
- WRDA [Report](#) - Gender Inequality in Northern Ireland: Where are we in 2020?
- Equality Coalition [Report](#) - Sectarianism: The Key Facts
- Women's Regional Consortium [Report](#): Brexit and the Impact on Women in Northern Ireland
- WRDA [Report](#)- Disabled Women and Discrimination
- Human Rights Consortium [Report](#) - Brexit: Rights at Risk
- Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trade Unions [Report](#): Childcare in Northern Ireland: Care, Cost and Gender Equality

- Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trade Unions Policy Document [Report](#): Better Work Better Lives
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions: [No Going Back, a New Deal for a Safe and Secure Future for All](#)
- TUC [Report](#) - Forced Out: The Cost of Getting Childcare Wrong
- Women's Sector Lobbyist Childcare for All [Blog](#) - Childcare: A Women's Issue
- Northern Ireland Women's European Platform - [Northern Ireland civil society shadow report to CEDAW](#)
- Amnesty International [Report](#) - Toxic Twitter
- Amnesty International with Women's Link Worldwide, International Planned Parenthood Federation: A [Guide](#) for Europe: Protecting the Rights of Women and Girls in times of COVID10 pandemic and its aftermath.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations:

This report will analyse the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in Northern Ireland in terms of economic justice, health, social justice and cultural inequality. In addition to this, implications of Brexit and the need for a Bill of Rights will be examined and an analysis of international best practice case studies will be done. Based on the evidence outlined in the above areas, recommendations will be made for gender-responsive budgeting and policy-making to both the NI Assembly and UK governments. Throughout each pillar an area of analysis will be framed around the following questions:

- A. How the government should find money to fund recommendations,
- B. How jobs can be stimulated under each pillar,
- C. What funding should, or shouldn't, be spent on,
- D. What a better, more resilient and gender-equal society will look like.

This plan will use a mix of political and economic policy-making recommendations to advocate for a feminist recovery to COVID-19 with the aim of not only avoiding deepening gender inequalities through recovery planning, but also tackling the gendered inequalities that already exist in our society.

For a summary of our top-level policy recommendations for each Department, the NI Executive and the UK Government, please contact rachel.powell@wrda.net.

1. Economic Justice Pillar

1.1 Overview of the Economic Impact of COVID-19

The spread and aftermath of COVID-19 have vast implications for women's equality globally. Evidence is emerging from across the world of COVID-19 deepening pre-existing inequalities through exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are amplifying the impacts of the pandemic³. The economic shock from COVID-19 is unprecedented in modern times, both in its magnitude and its nature⁴. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused mass disruption to markets and supply chains with businesses being required to close or scale back operations and millions have lost their jobs and livelihoods⁵. The International Labour Organisation has estimated that lockdown measures have affected 2.7 billion workers, which equates to approximately 81% of the world's workforce⁶. In the second quarter of 2020 alone, it is predicted that there will be massive losses in working hours, equivalent to 305 million full-time jobs, while 38% of the global workforce (1.25 billion workers) are employed in high-risk sectors⁷. The ILO also highlights that women have been the hardest hit, as they 'are disproportionately represented in high-risk sectors and are often amongst the first to lose employment and the last to return'⁸.

The International Monetary Fund projects a significant contraction of the global output in 2020, which has created a global recession which is strikingly different to any past recessions⁹. The IMF has projected that the global economy will contract sharply by 3% in 2020, which is much worse than during the 2008-09 global financial crisis¹⁰. To address this, they suggest:

'Effective policies are essential to forestall the possibility of worse outcomes, and the necessary measures to reduce contagion and protect lives are an important investment in long-term human and economic health. Because the economic

³ United Nations, (April 2020), 'Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women', *UN Women*, (available online): <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406> [accessed 30.04.20], p.2.

⁴ IMF (April 2020), 'World Economic Outlook, April 2020: The Great Lockdown', (available online): <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020#Introduction> [accessed 10.06.20].

⁵ Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: Responding To The Socio-Economic Impacts Of Covid-19 (March 2020) https://www.un.org/Sites/Un2.Un.Org/Files/Sg_Report_Socio-Economic_Impact_Of_Covid19.Pdf

⁶ Ibid, (n3), p.4.

⁷ ILO (June 2020), 'COVID-19 causes unprecedented jobs crisis, almost all workers and businesses affected by lockdown measures', *ILO COVID-19 Protecting Workers in the Workplace*, (available online): https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_748441/lang--en/index.htm [accessed 20.06.20].

⁸ Ibid, (n7).

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ Ibid, (n4).

fallout is acute in specific sectors, policymakers will need to implement substantial targeted fiscal, monetary, and financial market measures to support affected households and businesses domestically. And internationally, strong multilateral cooperation is essential to overcome the effects of the pandemic, including to help financially constrained countries facing twin health and funding shocks, and for channelling aid to countries with weak health care systems'¹¹.

When looking at the most recent World Economic Outlook Projections, the United Kingdom is expected to contract by 6.5% in 2020, which is a difference of -7.9% when compared to the World Economic Projection in January of 2020¹². As the world is struggling with the health and economic impacts of COVID-19, this is compounded by the aftermath of the financial crisis where interest rates have remained at historical lows and public debts, on average, are higher than they have been over the past 60 years¹³. With historically low interest rates, governmental monetary policy options appear to be more limited now than ever before, as 'low rates, and the associated limits on monetary easing through conventional interest rate cuts, may be a fact of life for the foreseeable future'¹⁴. As highlighted by the IMF and shown in figure 1 below, interest rates in advanced economies have been in a downward spiral for many years, a trend that accelerated after the global financial crisis. Central banks have decreased interest rates further in response to the pandemic, including the Bank of England, where the Base Rate was cut to an unprecedented 0.25% followed by a further cut to 0.1%, in an attempt to mitigate against the sharp economic shock by enabling cheaper borrowing for businesses and households in the.

Against this economic backdrop of low interest rates and high public debt, this Feminist Recovery Plan will make recommendations for policy-makers at a UK and devolved Northern Ireland level to mitigate against the upcoming recession in a manner that will avoid exacerbating gender inequality in Northern Ireland. Monetary Policy options may seem limited in this climate, however, we will be advocating for monetary decision-making with a gendered lens that will support long-term economic reform. In addition, although there is limited scope for conventional monetary measures of cutting rates and introducing rounds of quantitative easing, further monetary accommodation in the short term is possible using unconventional tools¹⁵. In sticking to the status quo, women will remain bearing the brunt of economic shocks and face greater barriers to economic participation. Relying on monetary policy alone is a risky strategy and despite an era of historically low interest rates, the UK government still has an immense capacity to enact several rules-based fiscal policies and further government borrowing to provide government support. It is evident that the global economy is facing an unprecedented challenge and with that, significant inter-governmental economic planning and creative policy-making is needed to recover.

¹¹ Ibid, (n4).

¹² Ibid, (n4), Chapter 1: Global Prospects and Policies, p.7.

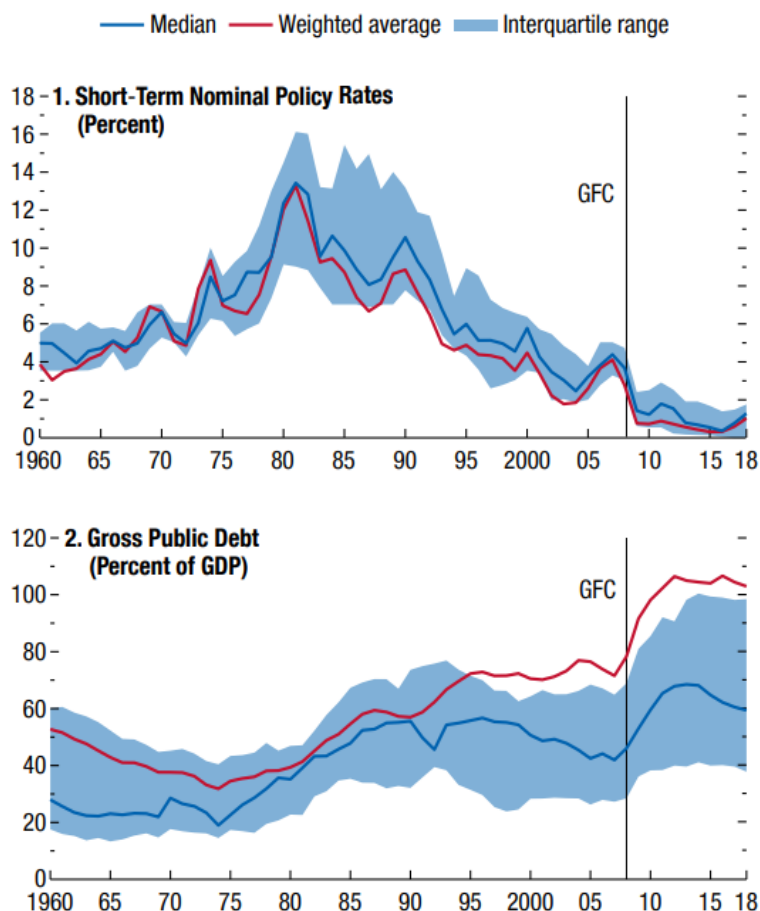
¹³ Ibid, (n4), Chapter 2: Countering Future Recessions in Advanced Economies: Cyclical Policies in an Era of Low Rates and High Debt, p.27.

¹⁴ Ibid, (n4), Chapter 2: Monetary Policy Options When Interest Rates Are Low, p.30.

¹⁵ Ibid, (n4), p.28.

Figure 1: Policy Rates and Public Debt in Advanced Economies:

Reflecting long-term trends and the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the average advanced economy policy rate is near its lowest level since 1960 while average public debt to GDP is near its historical highs.



Sources: Bank for International Settlements; Haver Analytics; IMF Historical Public Debt Database; IMF, *International Financial Statistics*; Mauro and others (2015); national sources; and IMF staff calculations.

Note: The sample includes 35 advanced economies. For panel 1, when a country joins the euro area, it drops out. The euro area policy rate (set by the European Central Bank) enters in 1999, replacing the policy rates for euro area member states as they join. The weighted average uses nominal US dollar GDP weights. Time coverage across countries is unbalanced. GFC = global financial crisis (2008).

Source: International Monetary Fund Global Outlook April 2020, p.28.

We would like to highlight the comments made by UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, in June 2020:

'The world of work cannot and should not look the same after this crisis. It is time for a coordinated global, regional and national effort to create decent work for all as the foundation of a green, inclusive and resilient recovery'¹⁶.

The WPG agrees with this statement, but would add that it is crucial that this is also done through a gendered lens, as the ILO, UN and many international bodies and countries across the world have recognised that the socio-economic impact of the pandemic is falling disproportionately to those who were already in precarious circumstances and who can least absorb the additional blow¹⁷. We know that women overwhelmingly make up those in precarious circumstances across the world. As highlighted by UNICEF:

'Given the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on gendered and multidimensional poverty, social protection responses that do not address the fundamental drivers of gender inequality, including unpaid care and responsibilities, will entrench already existing gender inequalities. As COVID-19 amplifies these inequalities, now is a critical window of opportunity to build more effective social protection to endure through future pandemics'¹⁸.

The global picture described above can be seen playing out in Northern Ireland, as we are not exempt from the economic, social and political implications of this pandemic. It has become clear that in just a few months, the Northern Ireland Economy has suffered immensely due to COVID-19, and the impacts of this are likely to be wide-reaching and long-term. Women were in extremely vulnerable and precarious economic positions before the pandemic, and this has now worsened. It is absolutely crucial both for women's wellbeing, and long-term economic recovery, that policy decisions to follow the pandemic do not further harm women's economic standing. Any government revenue raising should not come through austerity measures.

Women faced grave economic suffering following more than a decade of harsh austerity,¹⁹ as welfare reform policies introduced in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash had an adverse disproportionate impact on women. Existing research on the ongoing impact of austerity on women in Northern Ireland indicates that women are more likely to be greater impacted by austerity measures than men due to a range of societal factors that make women more likely to:

claim social security benefits, more likely to use public services, more likely to be in low-paid, part-time and insecure work, more likely to be caring for children/family members and more likely to have to make up for cuts to services

¹⁶ Ibid, (n7).

¹⁷ Ibid, (n7).

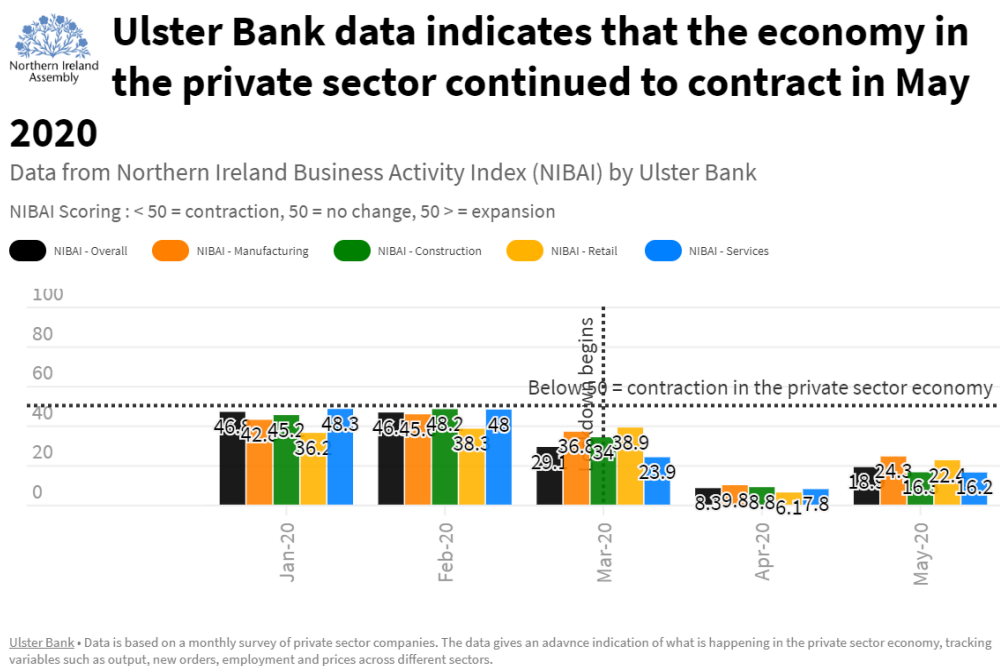
¹⁸ Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed and Ramya Subrahmanian, (April 2020), 'Caring in the time of COVID-19: Gender, unpaid care work and social protection', *UNICEF*, (available online): <https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/caring-in-the-time-of-covid-19-gender-unpaid-care-work-and-social-protection/> [accessed 15.06.20].

¹⁹ See Siobhán Harding, (March 2019), 'Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives', *Women's Regional Consortium*, (available online): <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Impact%20of%20Ongoing%20Austerity%20Women%27s%20Perspectives.pdf> [accessed 02.06.20].

through unpaid work. Regardless of the reason for this inequality the effect is the same – the cumulative effect of these reforms is felt by women and by the most vulnerable women – those on low incomes²⁰.

This pillar of the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan will look at a wide range of economic factors, provide evidence of existing, and deepen, inequalities for women, and make policy recommendations for the government to follow. Women in Northern Ireland have suffered enough due to what has been described as cruel and misogynistic economic choices in recent years,²¹ and any recovery cannot be to their detriment. As evidence emerges of contractions in Northern Ireland's private sector economy (figure 2), alongside falling levels of consumer confidence (figure 3) and vastly increasing levels of claimants (figure 4), rapid creative economic policy-making is needed to deal with this crisis.

Figure 2: Ulster Bank data on Private Sector Economy Contractions



Source: Northern Ireland Assembly Research Matters: The Impact of COVID-19 on Northern Ireland (18th June 2020)

²⁰ Ibid, (n5), p.6.

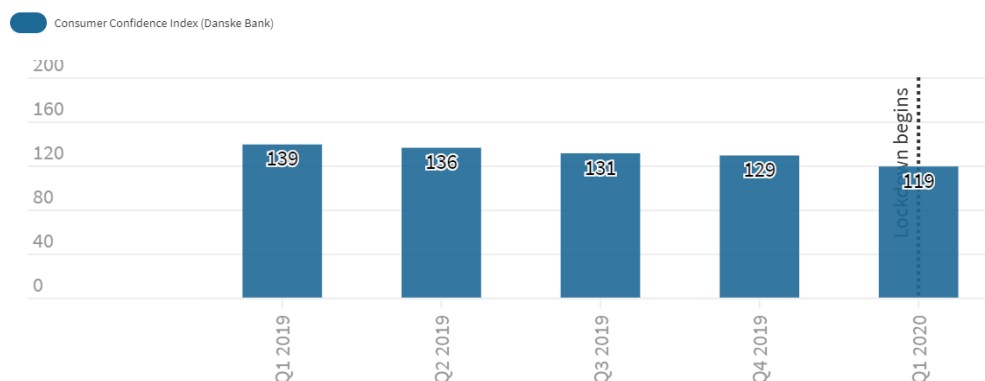
²¹ Philip Alston (November 2018), 'UK's welfare system is cruel and misogynistic, says UN expert after damning report on poverty', *The Telegraph*, (available online): <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/11/16/welfare-system-cruel-misogynistic-un-expert-warns-damning-report/> [accessed 15.06.20].

Figure 3:

Danske Bank data indicates that consumer confidence has been falling since the start of 2019

Consumer confidence continued to fall in Q1 2020 - with the coronavirus pandemic having a negative impact on how people were feeling.

Data from Danske Bank Consumer Confidence Index



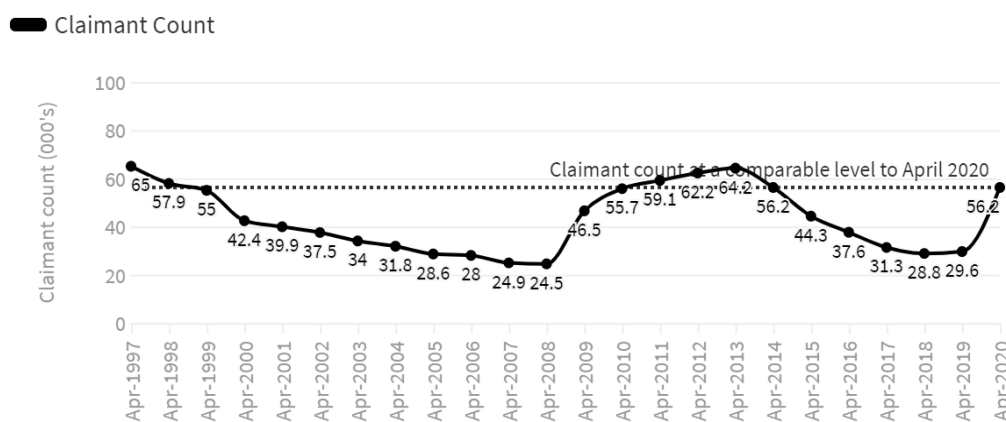
Danske Bank • The Danske Bank Consumer Confidence Index is a quarterly measure of how confident consumers in Northern Ireland are feeling and the main factors impacting consumer sentiment. The Q1 2020 survey was carried out during March and only partly captures the impact of the lockdown measures on sentiment levels.

Source: Northern Ireland Assembly Research Matters

Figure 4:

The claimant count in Northern Ireland has substantially risen in April 2020

The increase in the claimant count is likely driven by an increased number of claims resulting from the economic impact on business from COVID-19 and the government lockdown



Source: NISRA • The new experimental Claimant Count includes Jobseeker's Allowance Claimants and those out-of-work Universal Credit claimants who were claiming principally for the reason of being unemployed. Northern Ireland claimant count (000's) shown by month of April (1997 to 2020).

Source: Northern Ireland Assembly Research Matters: *The Impact of COVID-19 on Northern Ireland* (18th June 2020)

With context on the current global, and local, economic outlooks given, the Women's Policy Group will now provide an overview of the gendered economic impacts of COVID-19 below, alongside our recommendations on:

- A. How the government should find money to fund recommendations,
- B. How jobs can be stimulated under each pillar,
- C. What funding should, or shouldn't, be spent on,
- D. What a better, more resilient and gender-equal society will look like.

1.2 Women's Employment and Gender Pay Gap Reporting

Women's employment in Northern Ireland

'Despite some progress made over the last few decades in increasing women's labour force participation and narrowing gender gaps in wages, gender equality in the world of work still remains an elusive goal.'

- International Labour Organisation.

Background

Women in Northern Ireland continue to be more likely to be in insecure and part-time employment, and whilst the overall gender pay gap is the lowest in the UK, women still earn on average around 9.6% less than men²². Having dependent children significantly amplifies this difference and women responsible for dependent children are more likely to be in insecure, part time work.

Occupational segregation is still pervasive with men continuing to dominate in construction and manufacturing and women in public administration, education and health.

Policy failures around family leave frameworks fail all workers but impact disproportionately on women while the lack of affordable childcare, structured to facilitate women returning and staying in work, is still a very significant issue. Furthermore, women continue to experience significant sex discrimination, including sexual harassment and discrimination against mothers and pregnant women.

²² See: <https://www.pwc.co.uk/who-we-are/regional-sites/northern-ireland/press-releases/northern-ireland-rises-two-places-in-uk-female-economic-empowerm.html>

Insecure and Low Paid Work – The Gender Dimension

Northern Ireland undoubtedly has a problem with low pay. The Nevin Economic Research Institute estimated that in 2018, 28% of workers in Northern Ireland earned below the Real Living Wage with 10% earning below the National Living Wage. They further identify workers from accommodation and food sectors being particularly at risk of low pay²³.

The COVID-19 virus has caused governments to shut down large sections of the economy in order to contain infection whilst also being clear that there are essential services necessary to have a functioning society. In these sectors, workers have been expected to report to work as normal in order to maintain life, health and recovery, food and energy supply as well as vital public services. What the crisis has shown, is that there are thousands of workers who are essential to our economy.

Our society cannot survive without the labour that these workers provide, this is surely the definition of an ‘essential worker’. Given this definition, one would expect that a society which recognises the indispensability of these workers would seek to ensure that we have an economy which rewards these workers commensurate with the value that we place on their labour. This is not the case.

Instead, we have an economy where essential workers are among the lowest paid people in employment. In many instances, some of these workers also face the most precarious forms of employment so that the inadequate reward they receive for their labour is also highly uncertain.

In many cases, these low paid but essential workers are women and this is the driving force behind the persistent gender inequalities in our labour market. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has identified workers in food manufacturing, residential care and workplace cleaning as being especially vulnerable to low pay²⁴ with women in those sectors particularly vulnerable. 62% of women working in food manufacturing earn below the Real Living Wage²⁵, 55% of women in residential care earn below the RLW, whilst it is estimated that around 60% of women working as office cleaners earn below the RLW.

In other words, workers who we deem to be essential are not paid a wage that is sufficient to support a basic standard of living.

²³ See NERI research:

https://www.nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/2019/neri_research_inbrief_low_pay_in_ni.pdf

²⁴ See: https://www.ictu.ie/download/pdf/no_going_back_final_document_may_2020.pdf

²⁵ See:

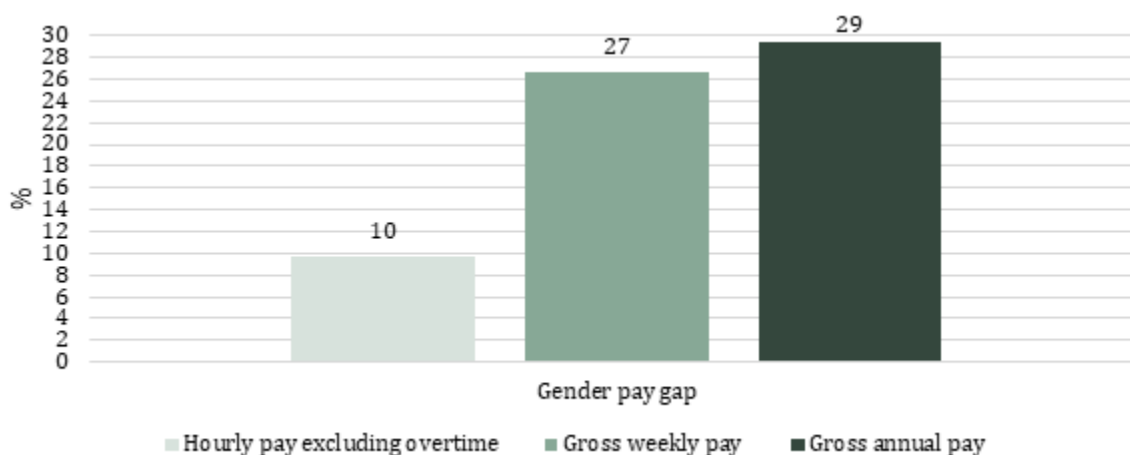
https://www.nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/2019/neri_research_inbrief_low_pay_in_ni.pdf

Gender Pay Gap

Whilst the overall GPG in Northern Ireland may be the lowest in the UK at 9.6%, there is no room for complacency. Research from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions²⁶ indicates that merely looking at the overall figure hides a much more complex picture.

When the hourly earnings excluding overtime across all workers is examined (including full-time and part-time) we see that women earn close to 10% less than men. This is due to the ‘part-time effect’ evidenced by the fact that women occupy more part-time jobs than men and these jobs tend to be lower paid than full-time jobs. This part-time effect is further illustrated by assessing the gender pay gap in terms of the gap in gross weekly and gross annual earnings between men and women as shown in figure 5 below. Gross weekly earnings are 27% below that of men, whilst gross annual earnings are almost 30% below that of men.

Figure 5: Percentage point gap in pay between men and women 2018



Source: *Better Work, Better Lives Report*²⁷

The WPG is extremely concerned that Gender Pay Gap reporting legislation and associated measures, promised in the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, are still to be implemented. The reporting legislation is important but will not, in itself, solve pay inequality. This is why it is vital that the legislation is accompanied by a comprehensive strategy and resourced action plan. This must also consider the issue of gender pay transparency.

²⁶ ICTU (2019), ‘Better Work, Better Lives: Childcare’, (available online): <https://www.betterworkbetterlives.org/sites/default/files/publications/ICTU%20Childcare%20Report%20June%202019.pdf> [accessed 29.06.20].

²⁷ <https://www.betterworkbetterlives.org/sites/default/files/publications/ICTU%20Childcare%20Report%20June%202019.pdf>

The European Trade Union Confederation estimates that if women were paid the same as men, the poverty rate among working women could be halved and 2.5 million children would come out of poverty.

Recommendations:

One of the measures the European Trade Union Confederation recommends to achieve equal pay is a comprehensive Gender Pay Transparency Directive to create more openness about pay and pay inequalities. This should include measures to:

- Ban pay secrecy clauses in contracts so that workers can discuss pay,
- Require information for job evaluation for the purpose of establishing equal pay for equal work,
- Make all employers produce pay information (audits) and annual action plans on pay equality,
- Support unions to negotiate with employers to tackle the pay gap,
- Require job advertisements to include the pay scale,
- Prevent employers hiding behind privacy, data protection or administrative burden to avoid pay transparency,
- Ensure transparency for the whole pay package including benefits, bonuses, pensions, allowances etc,
- Impose sanctions on employers who do not take action.

The Motherhood Penalty

A NIC ICTU policy document *Childcare in Northern Ireland: Care, Cost and Gender Equality*²⁸ found that women with dependent children are over represented in part-time employment, compared with men with or without dependent children and women with no dependent children. They are also more likely to be in temporary employment and much less likely to be self-employed than men with dependent children.

Men with no children are more likely than women to be in a full-time permanent job and having children greatly amplifies the difference in likelihood of being in a permanent, full-time job. Having one or more children reduces a woman's likelihood of being in a permanent, full-time job by almost one-third, with only 45% of women with one or more children working in a permanent, full-time job.

The decrease in the proportion of women with children to not be employed in permanent, full-time employment appears to be driven almost entirely by the much higher likelihood of women with children to work part-time. Fewer than 1 in 3 women with no dependent children work part-time. This compares to almost 1 in 2 women with dependent children who are employed on a part-time basis.

²⁸ Ibid, (n27).

Having dependent children reduces average weekly working hours of both men and women. There is, however, a much greater reduction in average working hours for women than there is for men. Women with dependent children work 5 hours less per week on average compared to women with no dependent children, whilst men with dependent children work 1 hour less on average compared with men with no dependent children. Women with no dependent children work around 8 fewer hours per week, on average, compared to men with no dependent children. Women with dependent children work an average of 11 hours less per week than men with dependent children.

Family Leave Frameworks

The Women's Policy Group has long argued that tinkering around the edges of policy will fail to solve persistent gender equalities. Instead what is needed is a comprehensive strategy to systematically tackle these issues, including a women's employment strategy which considers all of the issues which hold women back in work and in society. Part of this consideration must be the system of support for working parents and carers. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown into stark relief the totally inadequate childcare support system in Northern Ireland, a system which sees childcare as an individual responsibility rather than a public good.

It has also shown the urgent requirement to overhaul the legislative framework for flexible working and parental leave. The WPG supports recommendations from TUC on flexible working which include the recognition of²⁹:

'Flexibility at work can take lots of different forms, including the right to predictable hours, working from home, job-sharing, compressed hours and term time working.'

Currently, employees have the right to request flexible working arrangements, as long as they have been with their employer for at least 26 weeks. However, analysis by the TUC shows this right is limited and not fit for purpose. Flexi-time is unavailable to over half (58%) of the UK workforce. This number rises to nearly two-thirds (64%) for people in working-class occupations.

We need to reform the right to flexible working, making it a day one right for all workers. Government should introduce a duty on employers to publish flexible working options in job adverts and give workers the right to take up the advertised flexibility from day one. If employers feel that a role cannot accommodate any form of flexibility, they should be required to transparently set out the exceptional circumstances that justify this.'

²⁹ Ibid, (n87).

Clearly, the existing criteria for flexible working disadvantages women, vulnerable and low paid workers, who often work in low or zero hour contracts, and who may be in most need of flexibility in work patterns.

There is also an eligibility issue with parental leave again disadvantaging vulnerable workers. Parental leave is also unpaid which means that many parents will be unable to take it due to financial constraints. Shared parental leave was introduced to encourage more fathers to take leave to care for their children but, whilst this may have benefitted some families in the absence of other measures, it has not resulted in a large uptake of fathers taking leave to care for their children. The practical out-workings of the scheme are complicated and many couples are not eligible. For many families, availing of shared parental leave means an income cut as men are still the main breadwinner in many households.

Sex Discrimination

Sex discrimination in the workplace continues to be a shockingly common occurrence. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland estimates that around 25% of the queries they get to their legal helpline relate to potential sex discrimination at work. Of these, they estimate that 21.5% are to do with pregnancy or maternity³⁰. The issues raised are not confined to any particular sector and it is happening regardless of the level, type or grade of job held by women.

A survey conducted by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in 2019 found shockingly high levels of sexual harassment at work. ICTU surveyed more than 600 trade union members in Northern Ireland with experience of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the workplace and in line with international evidence, found that women were more likely to be victims of sexual harassment and men perpetrators. The survey also found that 75% of workers experiencing sexual harassment at work did not report the incident to their employer while of those who did report, 62% felt that it was not dealt with satisfactorily and in some instances reported that they had been treated less favourably as a result of reporting sexual harassment³¹.

In June 2019, at the Centenary Conference of the International Labour Organization (ILO)³², the Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) and its accompanying Recommendation (No. 206) were adopted. The global community has made it clear that violence and harassment in the world of work will not be tolerated and must end.

³⁰ CNI (2019), 'Pregnancy and Maternity Discrimination Remains an Issue for Working Mothers', *Equality Commission NI*, (available online): <https://www.equalityni.org/Blog/Articles/August-2019/Pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-remains-an> [accessed 29.06.20].

³¹ ICTU (2019), 'NIC-ICTU survey reveals shockingly high levels of under-reporting of sexual harassment at work', *ICTU*, (available online): <https://www.ictuni.org/news/2019/11/27/nicictu-survey-reveals-shockingly-high-levels-of-u/> [accessed 29.06.20].

³² ILO, 'Eliminating Violence and Harassment in the World of Work', (available online): <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/violence-harassment/lang--en/index.htm> [accessed 29.06.20].

These landmark instruments were developed by the key world of work actors (representatives of governments, employers and workers), and set out a common framework to prevent and address violence and harassment, based on an inclusive, integrated and gender-responsive approach. The Convention and the Recommendation also refer to domestic violence and its impact in the world of work.

The Preamble to the Convention notes that “domestic violence can affect employment, productivity and health and safety, and that governments, employers’ and workers’ organizations and labour market institutions can help, as part of other measures, to recognize, respond to and address the impacts of domestic violence”. As such, the Convention requires Members to “take appropriate measures to ... recognize the effects of domestic violence and, so far as is reasonably practicable, mitigate its impact in the world of work” (Art. 10(f)), and the Recommendation provides further guidance.

The inclusion of provisions regarding domestic violence in Convention No. 190 and Recommendation No. 206 reflects a fundamental change: historically, domestic violence was relegated as a “private” issue, with no connection to work, and it is now being acknowledged as having real consequences for workers, enterprises and the society at large.

The new instruments finally recognise the negative spillover effects that domestic violence can have on the world of work and the positive contribution that work can make towards improving the well-being of victims of domestic violence.

Trade Union Membership and Collective Bargaining

Recent research from the Nevin Economic Research Institute shows that 53% of employees in Northern Ireland have a trade union that bargains for pay in their workplace; 58% of women are employed in covered workplaces compared to only 42% of men employees, that women employees are more likely to be in covered workplaces is largely driven by the much larger proportion of women workers employed in the public sector³³.

NERI also finds that employees covered by collective agreements are likely to earn up to 13% more than similar workers who negotiate pay individually. The persistence of this union premium shows that despite lower trade union density, collective bargaining still delivers for workers in Northern Ireland.

For employers, there is also ample evidence of a connection between collective bargaining and higher productivity. Being a member of a trade union which bargains collectively on pay and terms and conditions brings a premium not only for the employee but also for the employer and is particularly important for women.

³³ NERI (2020):

<https://www.nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/2020/Union%20Wage%20Premium%20WP.pdf>

Recommendations:

- Develop a women's employment strategy which identifies the labour market issues facing women and an associated cross departmental action plan to tackle these.
- Introduce Gender Pay Gap legislation which is fit for purpose for Northern Ireland. Ensure that this is accompanied by an associated strategy, action plan and accountability measures which should be properly resourced.
- Introduce gender transparency measures to tackle inequality in men's and women's pay and pensions.
- Review flexible working legislation and make this available as a day one right for all workers.
- Make parental leave available as a day one right, introduce 10 days of paid parental leave.
- Reserve a period of paid parental leave for fathers – use it or lose it.
- Introduce a duty on employers to proactively tackle sexual harassment at work to include mandatory training for all employees including managers and HR personnel.
- The Northern Ireland Executive should recognise and promote the importance of collective bargaining and trade unions as a driver for better pay and terms and conditions as well as higher productivity.

1.3 Gender Segregated Labour Markets and Care Work

Industrial and Occupational Segregation

Substantive gender segregation remains in the labour market with men continuing to dominate in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as manufacturing and construction, and women continuing to dominate in public administration, education and health. The same is true in terms of occupational segregation – both men and women continue to dominate in occupations that have traditionally been associated with them. When the income of men and women across occupations ranging from the lowest hourly paid to the highest hourly paid is examined, it is apparent that women dominate in the low paid occupations. What is more, across the vast majority of occupations there remains a substantive gender pay gap, with women continuing to earn less pay per hour than men.

According to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, lone parents, 91% of whom are women, also experience occupational segregation in employment, with lone parents with dependent children mostly employed in 'Personal Service' and 'Elementary' occupations. Care-giving has been identified as one factor influencing occupational segregation with women and lone parents choosing occupations allowing sufficient flexibility to balance the demands of care-

giving. This may have a potential impact on the sustainability of employment, with women and lone parents having to consider pay and career progression with flexibility in employment³⁴.

UK-wide and Global Data

Gender-segregated labour markets are a reality across the world, and Northern Ireland is no exception to this. In the context of the ongoing global health crisis, increased attention has been drawn to the fact that women constitute over 70% of health and social care staff (79% in Northern Ireland), with a significant proportion from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. For many this involves a double burden, as women also shoulder the lion's share of unpaid care work. UNICEF defines care work as:

*'Supporting daily activities of individuals (such as cooking, cleaning, and providing daily essentials), as well as the health and wellbeing of others, including children and elderly'*³⁵.

Before the pandemic, globally women and girls carried out on average **three times** the amount of unpaid care and domestic work compared to men and boys³⁶. Pre-covid disparities in unpaid care work between men and women in the UK can also be seen in figure 5 below³⁷. During the lockdown, these responsibilities have increased significantly as women have faced increased responsibilities in relation to homeschooling, providing basic health care, childcare, shopping for vulnerable family members, ensuring dependents are abiding by new health and hygiene requirements and more. This puts women at increased risk of infection, as well as spreading infection to vulnerable family members. In addition to this, people over the age of 60 have the highest risk of infection, but they are also often the source of childcare to support many families and enable younger women to access work, education and training. As highlighted by UNICEF, the intergenerational impacts of the virus on long-term care arrangements, whereby children need to be separated from older family members, needs to be better understood³⁸.

Further evidence from UNICEF highlights:

³⁴ ECNI (), 'Delivering Equality Employment - Key Inequalities', (available online): <https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/Employment-KeyInequalities-SummaryStatement.pdf> [accessed 29.06.20].

³⁵ Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed and Ramya Subrahmanian, (April 2020), 'Caring in the time of COVID-19: Gender, unpaid care work and social protection', *UNICEF*, (available online): <https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/caring-in-the-time-of-covid-19-gender-unpaid-care-work-and-social-protection/> [accessed 15.06.20].

³⁶ UN Women (2019), 'Families in a Changing World', *Progress of the World's Women 2019-2020*, (available online): <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2019/progress-of-the-worlds-women-2019-2020-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3512> [accessed 20.06.20], p.15.

³⁷ The only exception of where men's responsibilities are greater than women is transport, in which this data includes transport to work for the individual.

³⁸ Ibid, (n19).

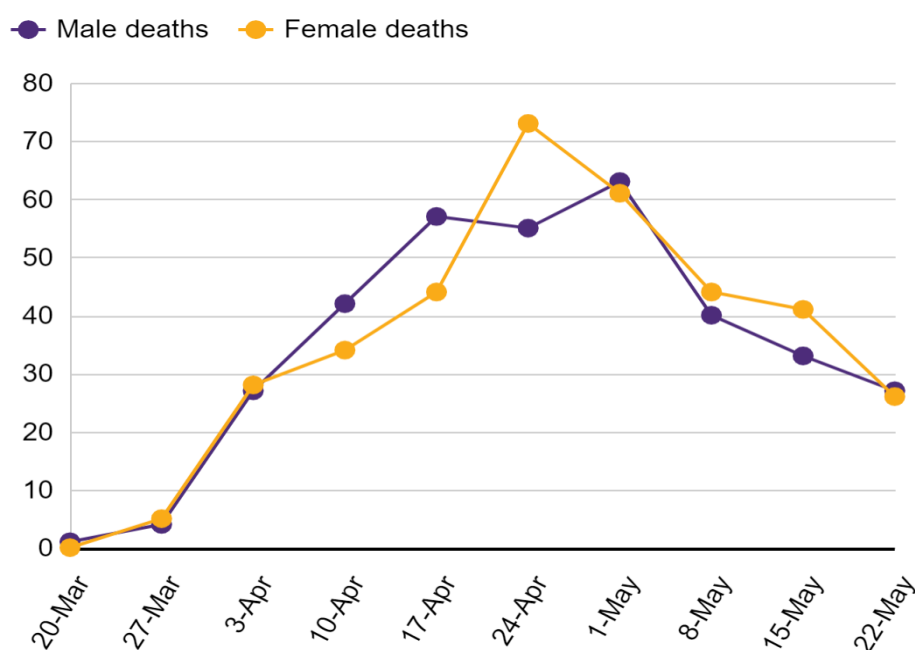
*Emerging data indicates that among confirmed cases of COVID-19 **men are consistently dying in higher numbers than women**. But when it comes to the economic and social fallout of the pandemic, women and girls face much greater risks³⁹.*

A UN policy-brief on the impact of COVID-19 on women also states:

Women will be the hardest hit by this pandemic, but they will also be the backbone of recovery in communities. Every policy response that recognises this will be the more impactful for it⁴⁰.

It is worth noting that in Northern Ireland, gender disaggregated data actually shows that whilst more men than women have died from COVID-19 across most of the world, that has not been the case here. Statistics from 22 May show that the percentage of all COVID-19 related male deaths was 49.5% and female deaths 50.5%⁴¹. Figures 6 and 7 below give a breakdown of deaths broken down by gender and age up to May 22, 2020 and May 31, 2020 respectively. Figure 8 highlights the unpaid care differentials in the UK.

Figure 6: COVID-19 in Northern Ireland: Gender of deaths registered where COVID-19 is recorded on the death certificate up to 22nd May 2020



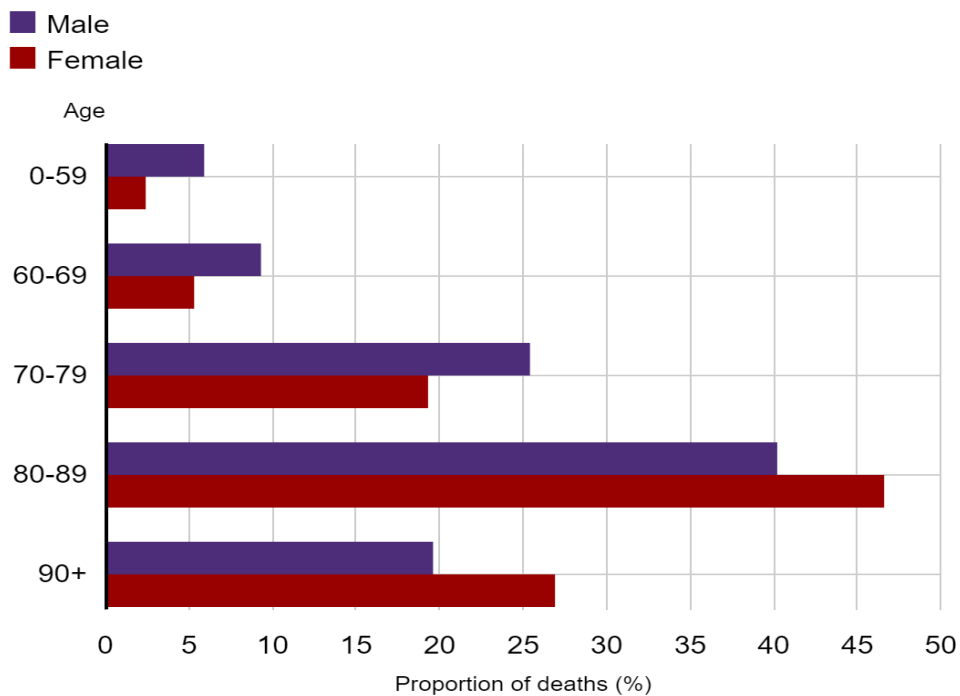
³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ United Nations, (April 2020), 'Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women', *UN Women*, (available online): <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406> [accessed 30.04.20].

⁴¹ BBC (May 2020), 'Coronavirus: What we know', (available online): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-52848841> [accessed 29.06.20].

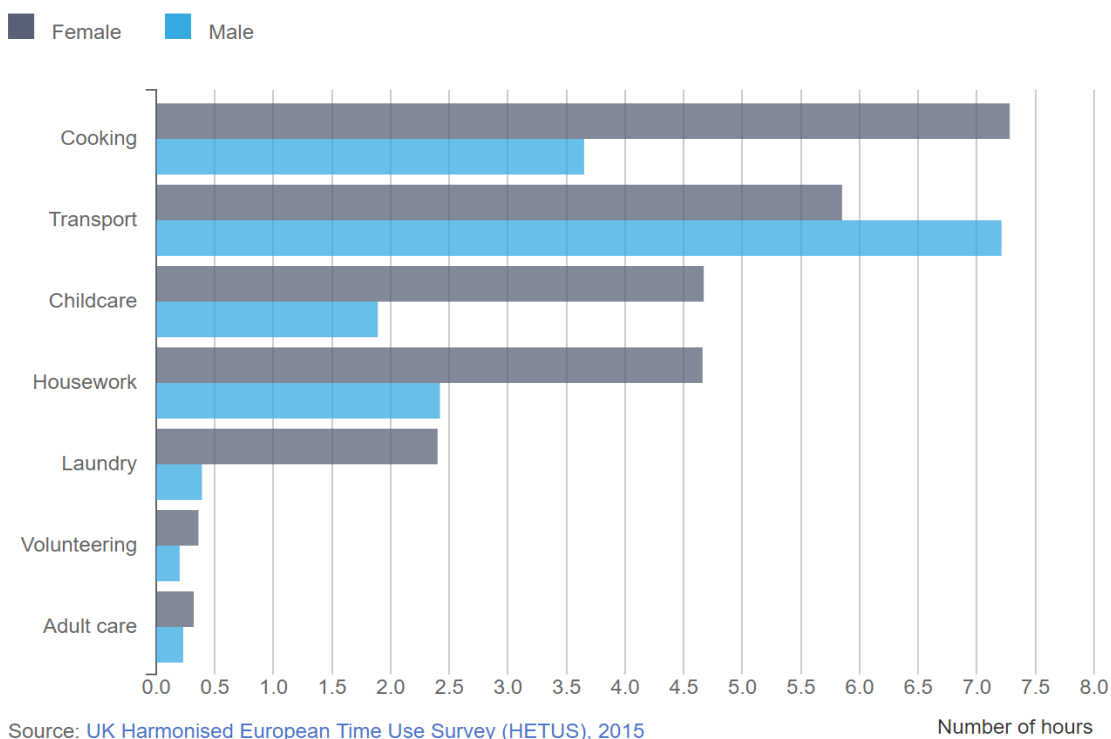
Source: BBC/NISRA

Figure 7: COVID-19 deaths in Northern Ireland: Proportion of COVID-19 related deaths by age and sex: up to 31st May 2020



Source: BBC/NISRA

Figure 8: Unpaid Care Work Differentials for Men and Women in the UK

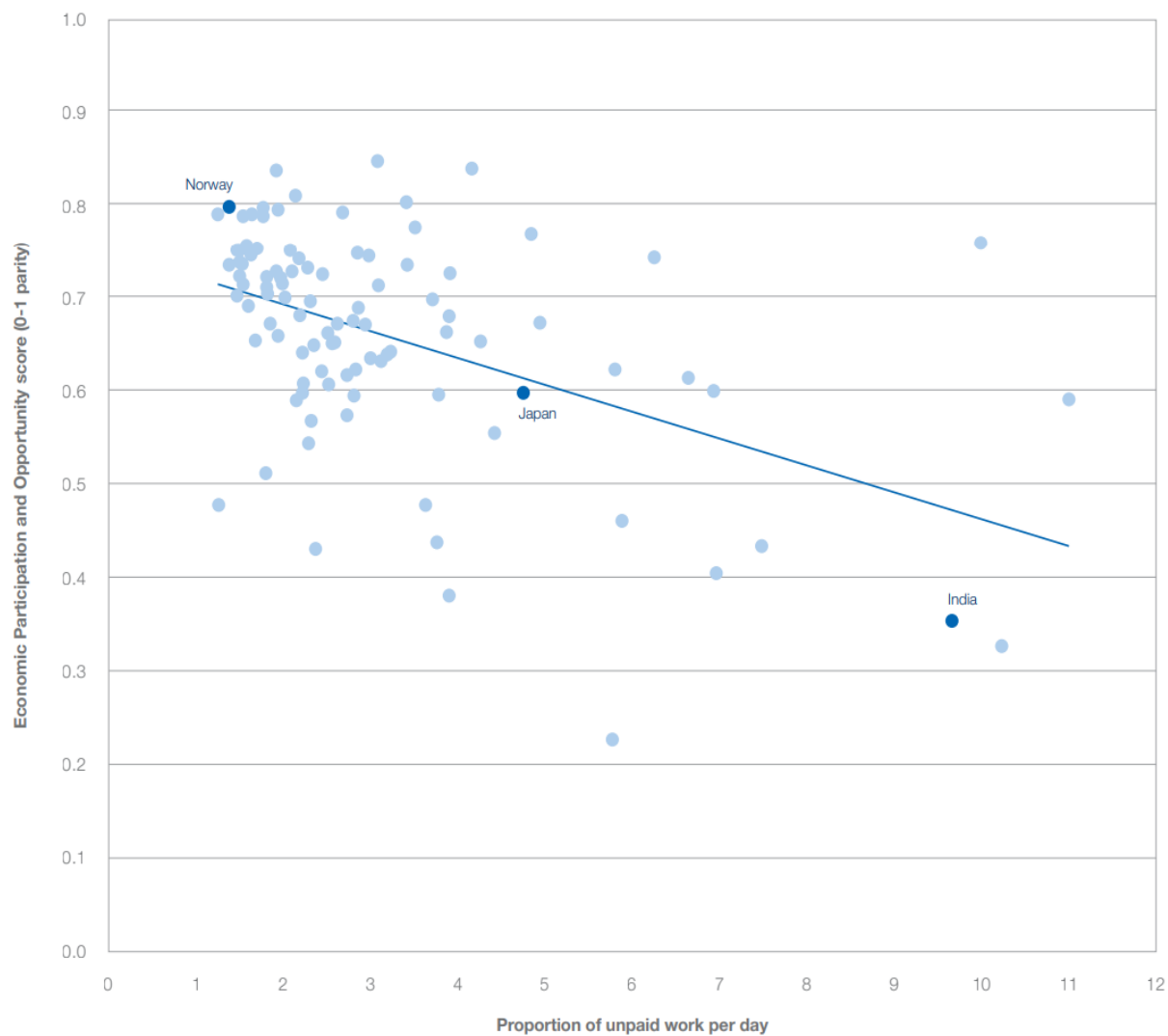


According to the World Economic Forum, gender segregated labour markets and a lack of gender parity has a negative fundamental bearing on whether or not economies and societies thrive⁴². Significantly, strong correlations can be found between high levels of unpaid work per day and the inability to access economic participation and opportunity, as seen in figure 9 below⁴³. How the UK compares to other countries in the unequal distribution of unpaid care can also be seen in figure 10.

⁴² World Economic Forum (2020) 'Mind the 100 Year Gap', *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*, (available online): http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf [accessed 22.06.20].

⁴³ Ibid, p.14.

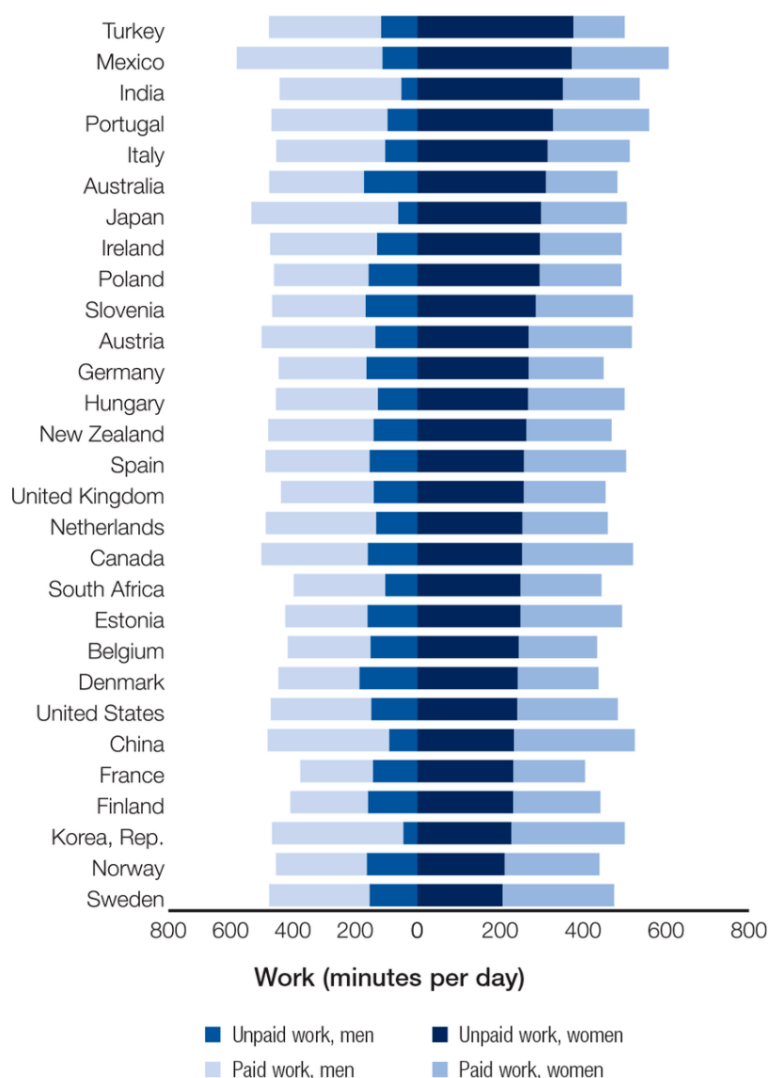
Figure 9: World Economic Forum Data on Unpaid Work and Economic Opportunities Correlations



Sources

World Economic Forum and OECD, *Gender, Institutions and Development Database (GID-DB)*.

Figure 10: Paid and Unpaid work (minutes per day) for men and women, by country



Source: OECD Social Protection and Wellbeing Database⁴⁴

Significantly, the findings from the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report 2020 also highlight the strong correlation between a country's gender gap and its economic performance. When looking at the UK gender gap in figure 11 below, the gender gap is still extremely prevalent and likely to worsen due to the economic impact of COVID-19. The WEF argue that this economic evidence 'highlights the message to policy-makers that countries that want to remain competitive and inclusive will need to make gender equality a critical part of their nation's human capital

⁴⁴ Found in: Ceri Parker, (2017), 'It's official: women work nearly an hour longer than men every day', *World Economic Forum*, (available online): <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/06/its-official-women-work-nearly-an-hour-longer-than-men-every-day/> [accessed 22.06.20].

development'⁴⁵. Across the UK, there is mass gender segregation across sectors. In particular, women are under-represented in high-paying jobs, STEM related work, and high-level decision-making roles. The under-representation of women in companies' board of directors can be seen in figure 12 below and the gender segregation clusters across sectors can also be seen in figure 13 below.

Figure 11: Global Gender Gap Index Rankings by region 2020

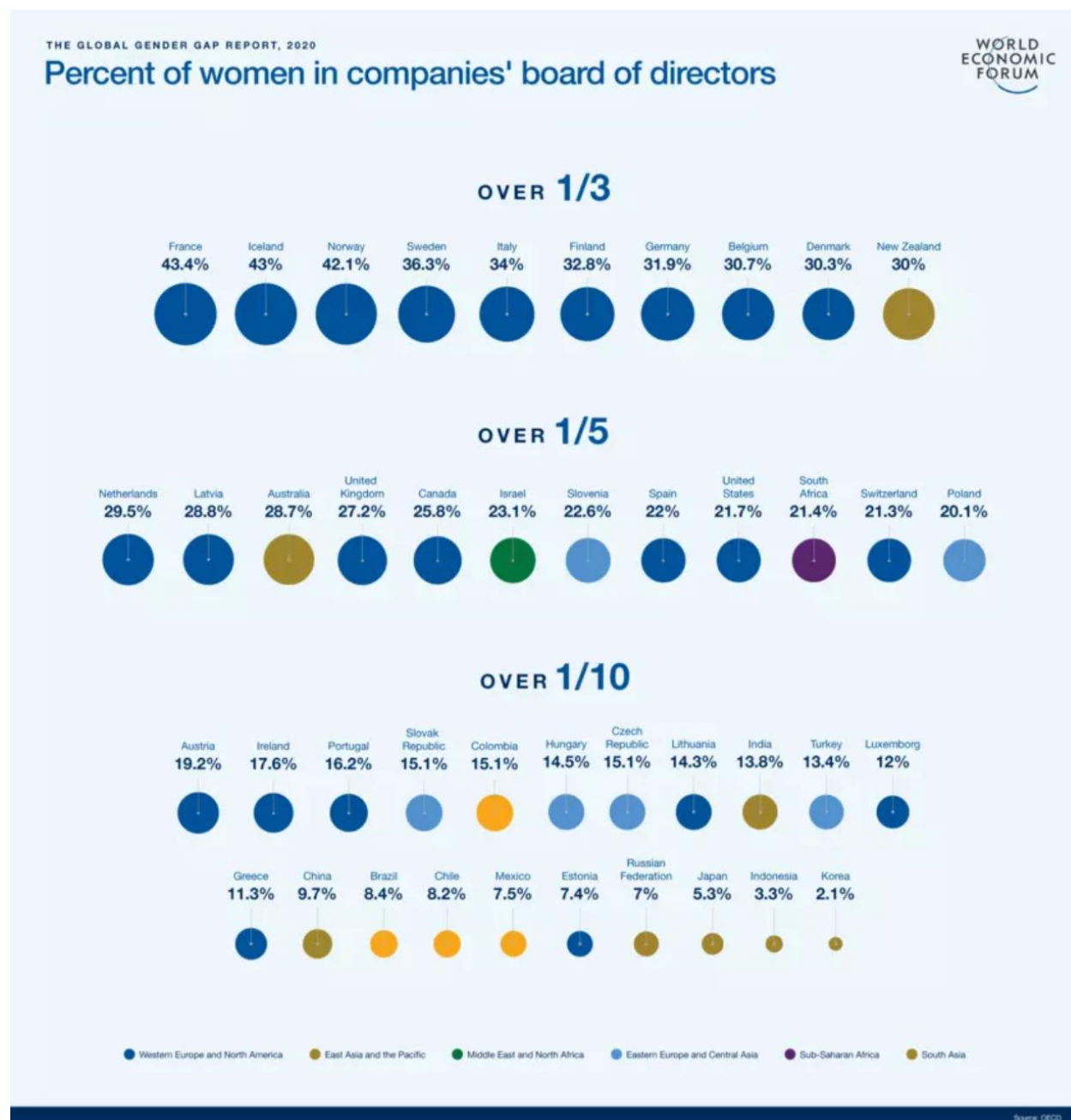
Western Europe and North America

Country	Rank		Score
	Regional	Global	
Iceland	1	1	0.877
Norway	2	2	0.842
Finland	3	3	0.832
Sweden	4	4	0.820
Ireland	5	7	0.798
Spain	6	8	0.795
Germany	7	10	0.787
Denmark	8	14	0.782
France	9	15	0.781
Switzerland	10	18	0.779
Canada	11	19	0.772
United Kingdom	12	21	0.767
Belgium	13	27	0.750
Austria	14	34	0.744
Portugal	15	35	0.744
Netherlands	16	38	0.736
Luxembourg	17	51	0.725
United States	18	53	0.724
Italy	19	76	0.707
Greece	20	84	0.701
Malta	21	90	0.693
Cyprus	22	91	0.692

Source: World Economic Forum - Gender Gap Report 2020

⁴⁵ Ibid (n28), p.33.

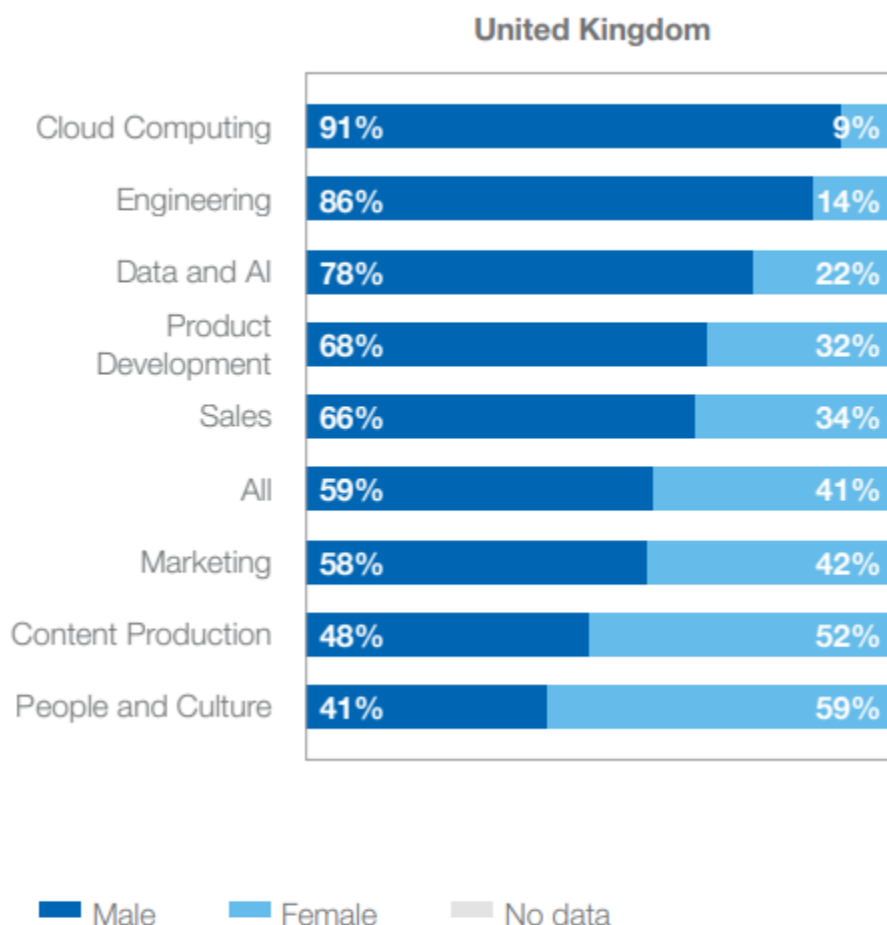
Figure 12: Representation of women in companies' board of directors globally



Source: OECD⁴⁶

Figure 13: Share of Men and Women by Professional Cluster

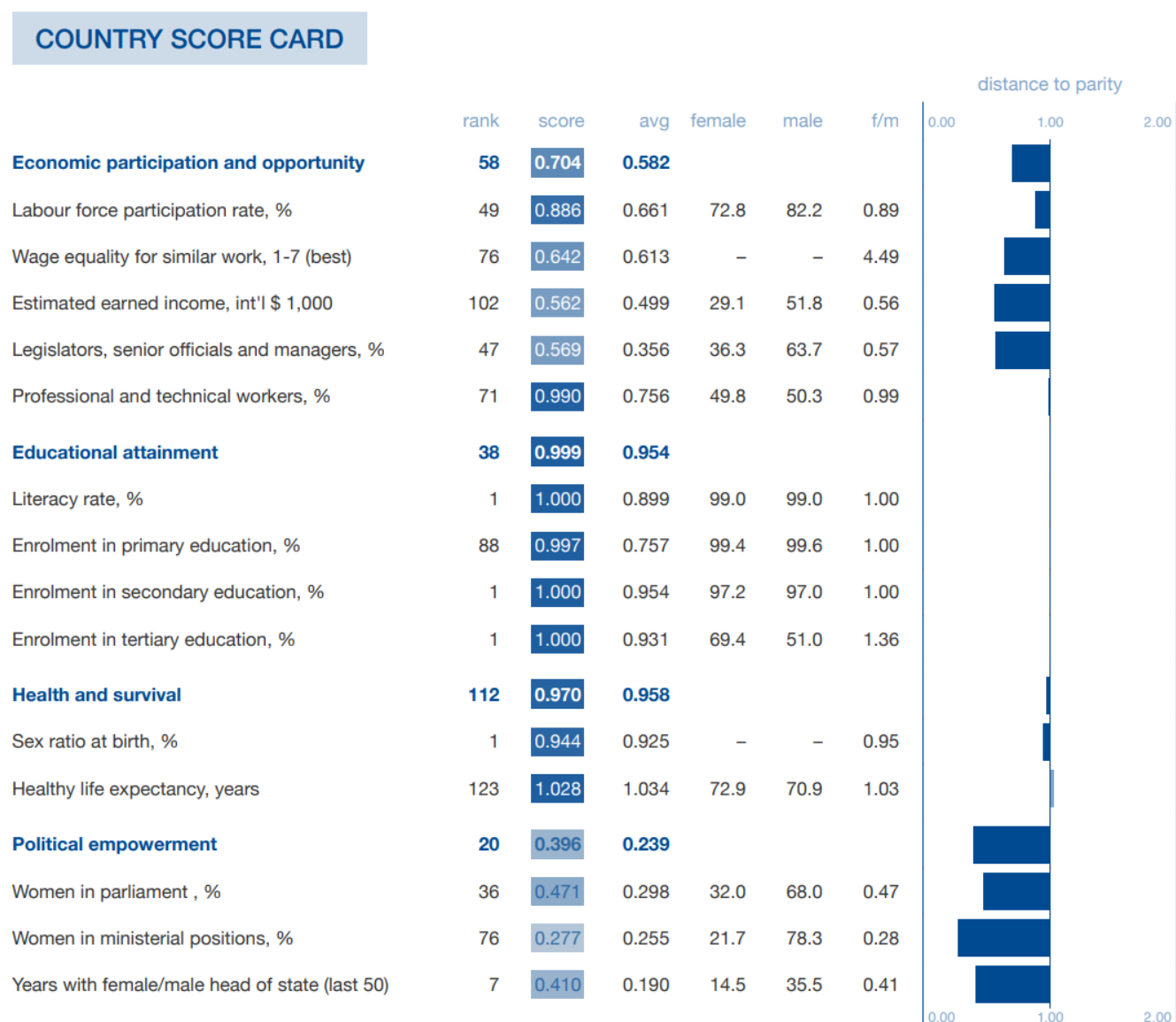
⁴⁶ Found in: World Economic Forum, (2019), 'Mind the 100 Year Gap: None of us will see gender parity in our lifetimes, and nor likely will many of our children', *World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report 2020*, (available online): <https://www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality> [accessed 23.06.20].



Source: World Economic Forum World Gender Gap Report 2020

According to the World Economic Forum, gender segregated labour markets now only lowers innovation levels in professions which lack gender diversity, but also that this professional gender divergence has a compounding effect on gender pay gaps⁴⁷. As the UK moves towards the “Fourth Industrial Revolution”, the ramifications of this are set to worsen if urgent action in tackling gender segregated labour markets is not taken. Figure 14 below further highlights the gender gaps in the UK in 2020. Clearly, economic participation and opportunity and political empowerment are areas of concern, where urgent action is needed to reduce gender gaps and segregation.

⁴⁷ Ibid, (n29), p.42.

Figure 14: World Economic Forum Gender Gap UK Score Card

Source: World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report April 2020, p.351⁴⁸

⁴⁸ More information on how to analyse the UK score card can be found on p5.59-61 Of the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report April 2020:
http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf

Northern Ireland Specific Data

When looking specifically at Northern Ireland, gender segregation and the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities is prevalent. Women are more likely than men to be forced out of the labour market by unpaid, domestic work or caring responsibilities and 69% of carers are women. Women in NI also have a 70% chance of providing care in their adult life, compared to 60% for men and by the age of 46, half of all women have been a carer (11 years before men)⁴⁹. Research from Carers NI shows that Northern Ireland's carers save the economy £4.6 billion per year⁵⁰; whilst unpaid carers across all the UK provide social care worth £57 billion per year⁵¹. What women have always known, and what has now been more unavoidable as the world tries to cope with the pandemic, is that care work, which is predominantly undertaken by women and girls, is central to the functions of every economy; yet it is still treated as a private issue and undervalued as contributors to economies.

Research on the rise of unpaid carers in the UK during COVID-19 highlights that the pandemic has led to an increase of 4.5 million people providing unpaid care; which is an almost 50% increase in the number of unpaid carers since the crisis began⁵². Many new unpaid carers are drawn from the working population, as 26% of all workers are now juggling work and unpaid care; an increase from one in six to one in four⁵³. Significantly, this highlights where future carers may come from if there is not sufficient investment in carer and support and significant investment into the redistribution of care work, and supporting unpaid carers, is needed urgently. The losses of a failure to invest in care will not only be felt by carers and their families, but to the employers and Northern Ireland economy alike.

⁴⁹ WRDA (February 2020), 'Gender Inequality in Northern Ireland: Where are we in 2020?', *Bold Women Blogging*, (available online): <https://wrda.net/2020/02/07/gender-inequality-in-northern-ireland-where-are-we-in-2020/#:~:text=In%202020%2C%20Northern%20Ireland%20has,decision%20making%20across%20Northern%20Ireland.> [accessed 22.06.20].

⁵⁰ Carers NI (2015), 'NI Carers save government £4.6 billion a year', (available online): <https://www.carersuk.org/northernireland/news-ni/valuing-carers-15> [accessed 22.06.20]; see also: Carers NI (2017) 'State of Caring 2017', (available online): <http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/pdf/state-of-caring-ni-version-2.pdf> [accessed 22.06.20].

⁵¹ Office for National Statistics (2017), 'Unpaid carers provide social care worth £57 billion', (available online): <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/articles/unpaidcarersprovidesocialcareworth57billion/2017-07-10> [accessed 22.06.20].

⁵² Carers Week (2020), 'Carers Week 2020 Research Report: The rise in the number of unpaid carers during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak', *Making Caring Visible*, (available online): https://www.carersuk.org/images/CarersWeek2020/CW_2020_Research_Report_WEB.pdf [accessed 23.06.20], p.4.

⁵³ *ibid.*

This research also found that in Northern Ireland⁵⁴:

- 15% of respondents said they were already providing care before the COVID-19 outbreak (212,000 people) and a further 7% stated that they have started caring since the outbreak (98,000 people). Using population projections, it can be estimated that there are as many as 312,000 unpaid carers,
- 59% of respondents stated that unpaid caring responsibilities was having a detrimental impact on their ability to do paid work,
- 54% identified the financial impact of additional care costs as a key concern,
- 49% expressed high concern over not having anyone to talk to about the challenges of caring,
- 54% of respondents in NI stated that they are now more aware of the role of unpaid carers than before and 74% thought that carers were not well valued or valued at all,
- 72% of respondents in NI do not believe that unpaid carers have been supported by the Government during the COVID-19 pandemic,
- 74% of NI respondents also believed that the government should increase support; for example, though increased financial support, investment in care and support services so unpaid carers can take a break and through further investment in social services.

It is clear that both the UK government and the Northern Ireland Assembly need to urgently address unpaid caring responsibilities in any recovery planning and longer-term economic modelling. Given the disproportionate levels of unpaid caring responsibilities taken on by women, and the drastic impact this can have on women's participation in paid work and life time earnings, a gendered lens is needed in addressing the segregation of care work to prevent further embedding gender inequality.

In analysing gender segregation in paid work, women also disproportionately work in care, cleaning, catering, retail, hospitality and clerical jobs with poor protections, including sick leave, which makes them particularly vulnerable. In Northern Ireland, 70% of workers that are ineligible for Statutory Sick Pay and 82% of part-time workers are women, in large part due to their additional caring responsibilities such as those mentioned above. This is of particular concern, as women frontline care workers are at higher risk of infection, especially given the failures to ensure all frontline workers had access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), or PPE that adequately fits women due to their "universal" build⁵⁵. Given the precarious nature of much of this work, particularly in the private sector or for those caring for people in other people's homes, women are more likely to be unable to take time off work or stay at home to care for themselves and others due to the lack of SSP, not having employment contracts or feeling more pressure to stay at work.

The above trends are also evident in labour markets beyond those mentioned above as further evidence of gender segregation is present; with women underrepresented in higher-paying jobs in every sector in Northern Ireland. The below statistics from the NI Assembly Research and

⁵⁴ Ibid, pp.27-28.

⁵⁵ Equality Coalition (April 2020), 'Civil Society Groups Call for Action to Ensure Inequalities are not Exacerbated by COVID-19 Crisis', (available online): <https://www.equalitycoalition.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Equality-Coalition-Covid-19-joint-statement.pdf> [accessed 22.06.20].

Information Service shine a light on the vast gender segregation and disparities across the public sector in January of 2020⁵⁶:

- In Northern Ireland politics, women represent 37% of Lord Mayors, 26% of Local Councillors, 33% of MLAs and just 22% of MPs,
- In Public Appointments, women represent 28% of Chairs and 42% of all Public Appointments,
- Women represent 0% of Lord Chief Justice and Lord Justices of Appeal, just 25% of High Court Judges and 33% of County Court Judges,
- In the PSNI, zero women hold the position of Chief or Deputy Chief Constable and only 20% are Assistant Chief Constables. Women represent 30% of police officers and 58% of all PSNI staff,
- In the Civil Service, women represent 33% of Permanent Secretaries; 38% of Senior Civil Servants and 50% of the total NICS workforce,
- In the Education Sector, women represent 27% of University Chancellors or Pro/Deputy Vice Chancellors, 29% of FE College Principals and 60% of School Principals; despite 77% of all teachers being women,
- In the Health and Social Care Sector, women make up 79% of all staff but just 20% of Trust Chairs and 20% of Trust CEOs,
- In Local Government, women are 42% of all employees but just 27% of Council CEOs.

Recommendations:

WPG recommendations to address gender segregation and the unequal distribution of care include:

- It is essential that home carers, as well as health and social care staff, have access to appropriate advice and where required to adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), to protect themselves and society at large.
- Action must be taken to acknowledge the many women who work in precarious, low-paid jobs that are unable to stay at home due to employer reluctance to furlough these workers; particularly as many of these women do not have trade union representation nor can they benefit from collective bargaining.
- In addition to this, action needs to be taken to address how difficult it is for women to complete all aspects of work from home when trying to manage their workloads, childcare and providing education from home.
- Measures should be introduced to prevent employees from being penalised.
- Monitoring gender parity in the professions of the future provides a critical opportunity to guide the emerging labour market to more equitable outcomes in the future of work.
- Urgently increase the supply and visibility of women with disruptive technical skills.

⁵⁶ NI Assembly Research and Information Service, (January 2020), 'Who Runs Northern Ireland? A Summary of Statistics Relating to Gender and Power in 2020', (available online): http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2017-2022/2020/assembly_exec_review/0120.pdf [accessed 22.06.20].

- To ensure that the professions of the future can target gender parity within the coming decade, reskilling and upskilling efforts for women interested in expanding their skills range should be focused on those already in the labour market or looking to re-enter the labour market after a period of inactivity.
- Build on existing good practice evidenced in alteration of policy on Maternity Allowance for women furloughed due to COVID-19.
- Promote conciliation measures and actions finalised to increase equal opportunities in both education and work⁵⁷. Family policies, social protection systems and measures finalised to reduce gender inequalities, encouraging high education and job opportunities for women are some measures that can be taken.
- Analyse the economic value of putting money into caring may help carers get back into paid employment and thus improve their health and financial wellbeing and consequently reducing pressure on the health and benefits systems in the long-run.
- For a better, more resilient economy, it is essential that we value and recognise care work. It needs to be a valued job that is paid well, attracts investment in education and training, provides opportunities for promotion and is seen as a valued career.
- Require all workplaces to record and publish gender segregation and gender pay gap data.

The WPG also supports the below medium-term and longer-term recommendations from the UK Women's Budget Group⁵⁸:

- Require employers to report the numbers of people made redundant with breakdowns by gender and other protected characteristics.
- Require the reinitiation (or implementation in the NI context) of gender pay gap reporting; including reporting on pay gaps during the COVID-19 lockdown.
- Do not turn to austerity measures to pay for the cost of the crisis.
- Invest in social infrastructure, including health, care and education.
- Design a sustainable and stable social care system so that no-one has unmet needs, free to the point of use with well paid, well trained permanent staff and funded via general taxation.
- Reform the social security system so that it protects all people, including migrants, against risk, poverty and destitution.
- Rethink work so that jobs pay a decent wage regardless of age – a true living wage for all – and reflects a shared balance between work, care and leisure for all.
- Take action to address the housing crisis by reducing rent and increasing housing support.
- Sustainably funding the women's sector so that no woman is left in danger.
- Introduce policies to encourage sharing of care and unpaid work between women and men.

⁵⁷ Rosalia Castellane et. al. (2019), 'Analyzing the gender gap in European labour markets at the NUTS-1 level', *Cogent Social Sciences* Vol 5. 2019 Iss. 1., (available online):

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311886.2019.1595294>

⁵⁸ UKWBG (May 2020), 'Briefing from the UK Women's Budget Group: Easing Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women', (available online): <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Easing-lockdown-.pdf> [accessed 29.06.20].

Recommendations from Carers Week Report which we endorse include⁵⁹:

- There is a significant role for information and advice for carers, forward planning, but also better support so that people can rely on what they need.
- Whilst Governments in every nation across the UK have implemented measures to support carers, there is no doubt that there are gaps that need to be plugged to improve carers' lives in the short term. In the longer term, the Government needs to build a better future for carers that tackles the underlying issues that they face.
- Increase awareness of the role of caring and unpaid carers - the NI Assembly should promote awareness of the important role of unpaid carers and caring, and introduce more concrete support so that value is recognised practically.
- Fund and rebuild social care and health services - the NI Assembly needs to recognise the amount of pressure the system has been under during the coronavirus outbreak, and the funding shortages that were widely recognised for many years before the crisis. There needs to be a significant increase in funding levels to allow the social services and the NHS to rebuild after the crisis, alongside bringing forward plans for long-term reform of social care. Greater investment in care will lead to a healthier and happier population that is better able to balance important aspects of their lives, including personal relationships, work and family.
- End carers' financial hardship - Financial support for carers must be urgently improved, which would particularly benefit women who are more likely to be caring and providing higher levels of care. The UK Government and NI Assembly should immediately increase the basic level of Carer's Allowance, and a one-off coronavirus Supplement to those entitled to Carer's Allowance of £20 a week to match the rise in Universal Credit.
- Greater consistency is needed in connecting carers to support available to look after their own mental and physical health and wellbeing. Support for carers to take part in physical activity, for example, can be hugely beneficial in preventing them developing health problems in later life as well as reducing isolation.
- Support working carers more through employers and by Government - Employers, and the NI Assembly, should ensure that there are carer-friendly policies in place that enable working carers to balance their caring responsibilities with work. We fully support the Government's plans to introduce an entitlement to take care leave for working carers; our preference would be for this to be paid.
- Schools, colleges and universities should be encouraged to introduce policies and programmes that support carers and improve their experience of education.

⁵⁹ See (n38).

The WPG also supports UN recommendations to⁶⁰:

- First, immediate support for at-risk workers, enterprises, jobs and incomes, to avoid closures, job losses and income decline.
- Second, a greater focus on both health and economic activity after lockdowns ease, with workplaces that are safe, and rights for all.
- Third, mobilization now for a human-centred, green, sustainable and inclusive recovery that harnesses the potential of new technologies to create decent jobs for all, and takes advantage of the creative and positive ways companies and workers have adapted to these times.

Finally, we recognise that some policy decisions are not possible through devolved institutions and when looking at the UK as a whole, the WPG would encourage gender-budgeting and progressive fiscal and monetary policy making from the UK government. In particular, the WPG would like to endorse calls from Tax Justice UK in agreeing common goals to build back a better world affected by coronavirus. These calls include drastic tax reform across the UK as Tax Justice UK have highlighted that:

The pandemic has reminded us just how valuable the contribution of carers, nurses and key workers is to a caring society. In the long term we need to be spending more money on health, care and other areas to ensure we have a resilient society and economy. However, this cannot happen without reform of the tax system.

The UK's approach to tax is dysfunctional: we don't raise enough money, avoidance is rife and wealth is under-taxed. Despite progress, estimates suggest that £35 billion to £90 billion of tax goes uncollected per year.

The government also spends over £164bn a year on tax reliefs - many of which are badly targeted and largely benefit the well off and big companies. The corporate tax rate has been slashed from 28% in 2010 to the current 19%. The UK also contributes through its reliefs and loopholes to a broken international tax system, which deprives other countries of revenue.

The Covid-19 crisis shows that the government has huge financial power, flexibility and choice over how to support public spending. Tax reform to support a fairer and greener future argues that as the immediate crisis fades there will be big political debates about how to build back better. A fair tax system should underpin more investment in high quality public services and we must be ready to challenge those who are already arguing for austerity 2.0.⁶¹

⁶⁰ (n7).

⁶¹ Tax Justice UK (June 2020), 'Progressive groups call for tax reform post-covid', (available online): <https://www.taxjustice.uk/blog/progressive-groups-call-for-tax-reform-post-covid> [accessed 29.06.20].

We support the following recommendations from Tax Justice UK⁶²:

- **No bailouts for tax dodgers** - require companies receiving large bailouts to end artificial tax avoidance arrangements and tax haven structures, publicly disclose where profits are made and who benefits, and publish their tax policy.
- **Tax companies properly** - close down loopholes, end the tax subsidies many companies enjoy, bringing in a higher effective tax rate and require the publication of corporate tax affairs.
- **Tax wealth more** - Ensure that income from wealth is taxed at least as much as income from work. Reform areas where wealth is currently under-taxed including property, inheritances, capital gains, dividends and pensions. Actively consider a wealth tax.
- **Stop undermining the tax systems of other countries** - shut down the tax loopholes and secrecy provisions that deprive other countries of revenue.
- **Enforce the rules** - clamp down on tax dodging. Properly fund HMRC and Companies House, and give them tools so that they can enforce our laws.

A combination of measures both at a UK-wide and Devolved level are needed from elected representatives to address the systemic gender segregated markets and unequal distribution of care. Investment in care provides strong returns economically in the long run, and we would urge decision-makers to consider the above recommendations to fund adequate investments and to oppose the implementation of further austerity.

1.4 Women's Poverty and Austerity

The response to the 2008 financial crash was a programme of austerity and welfare reform. Research suggests that these policies had a disproportionate impact on women showing that 86% of the savings to the Treasury from the tax and benefit changes since 2010 have come from women.⁶³ This is due to a range of societal factors that make women more vulnerable to these policies. Women are more likely to claim social security benefits, more likely to use public services, more likely to be in low-paid, part-time and insecure work, more likely to be caring for children/family members and more likely to have to make up for cuts to services through unpaid work. Regardless of the reason for this inequality the effect is the same – the cumulative effect of these reforms has been felt by women and by the most vulnerable women – those on the lowest incomes.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes, Richard Cracknell, Richard Keen, Commons Briefing Papers SN06758, December 2017
<http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06758/SN06758.pdf>

Research by the Women's Regional Consortium⁶⁴ details the struggles many local women have faced with austerity policies and illustrates that many women continue to feel the effects of austerity and welfare reform many years after these were introduced.

A decade of austerity has meant many families already struggle to get by and the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic means that many of these families will face new challenges. Many people have lost their jobs, experienced cuts in their working hours and loss of earnings as a result of the pandemic. Research by the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex has shown that single mothers and the lowest paid are hardest hit by the loss of income in the Coronavirus crisis.⁶⁵ The research showed that in the highest income bracket, average earnings in February stood at £832 a week, and fell by £46 a week. In the lowest income bracket, they fell £43 a week, but from an average of £297. On average, single parents' earnings fell by more than double the amount experienced by households with children and more than one adult. Their average weekly household earnings fell £36, from £511 in February to £475 in April but single-parent households saw their average weekly earnings fall by £73, from £326 to £253 over the same period.

The result of this loss of income has meant that people have been forced to take action to mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic including reducing their spending, using savings, borrowing money, applying for Universal Credit and approaching charities including food banks for help. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children⁶⁶ has shown that parents who were caught in poverty pre-crisis are around 50% more likely to have lost their jobs than parents who were better off, 6 in 10 families are having to borrow, 7 in 10 families have had to cut back on essentials and over 5 in 10 families are falling behind on rent or other essential bills.

Demand for food banks in Northern Ireland has soared because of COVID-19. In April the number of emergency food parcels given out by the Trussell Trust locally rose 142% compared to the same time last year.⁶⁷

The Coronavirus pandemic has had a huge impact on the number of Universal Credit claims due to the scale of job losses and the impacts on people's working lives of the lockdown. On 1 March, 70,000 people were claiming Universal Credit in Northern Ireland and by 26 April this number had risen by 80% to 126,000. The number of applications during this 8-week period totalled 65,700 with a ten-fold increase in new claims recorded at the height of the crisis in mid-March.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives, Women's Regional Consortium, March 2019 <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Impact%20of%20Ongoing%20Austerity%20Women%27s%20Perspectives.pdf>

⁶⁵ COVID-19 Survey, Briefing Note, Wave 1: April 2020, Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, May 2020 <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/2020/05/29/single-mothers-and-lowest-paid-covid>

⁶⁶ A lifeline for our children: Strengthening the social security system for families with children during this pandemic, Briefing by Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children, June 2020 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/file/55316/download?token=zdQGDbBp&filetype=briefing>

⁶⁷ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/health/coronavirus/coronavirus-crisis-sees-demand-for-food-banks-soar-in-northern-ireland-39257078.html>

⁶⁸ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-publishes-information-impact-covid-19-universal-credit-claims>

Latest available figures from the DfC show that there were 134,000 people claiming Universal Credit at 31 May 2020.⁶⁹

The Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the need for the benefits system to act as a safety net for people in difficult times. It is likely that as the economy emerges from lockdown and faces a significant recession that many household finances will continue to struggle. Part of the solution must be to ensure that the benefits system provides sufficient support to the huge numbers of people impacted by this crisis both those facing a temporary income shock and also those facing longer-term financial hardship.

Before the pandemic women were already more vulnerable to poverty as they made up the majority of lone parents, those with precarious/low-paid jobs and those with caring responsibilities which limited their time for paid work. Job losses and the need to provide increasing levels of unpaid care as a result of the pandemic is likely to increase poverty and dependence on social security benefits especially for women. It is therefore imperative that as society emerges from the pandemic and the resulting recession, women must not pay the price for Covid-19 as they did for the previous financial crash.

The Women's Budget Group (WBG) has urged the Government not to turn to austerity measures to pay for the cost of the crisis. The WBG stressed that this will repeat the past and impact poor, BAME and disabled women the most. The WBG has suggested a range of alternative ways to pay for the measures needed including investment in social infrastructure to boost the economy, increased taxes on wealth and tackling tax evasion, avoidance and havens.⁷⁰

Recommendations for changes in relation to social security benefits:

- Direct payments in lieu of school meals should continue throughout the summer months and until such times as all children are fully back to school.
- Increase the level of Child Benefit to £50 per child per week to help poorer families stay out of poverty and reflect the additional costs facing parents.
- Increases in the standard allowances for Universal Credit and Tax Credits by £20 are to be welcomed but the Government should mirror these increases to households on legacy benefits also.
- As Universal Credit is one of the key benefits for those who have lost their jobs or suffered significantly reduced income a range of changes are required to help ensure it better supports people:
 - The basic levels of Universal Credit should be increased in line with real living wages indefinitely to support those who have lost their jobs.
 - At the very least Government should hold on to the increase in the standard allowance even after lockdown has ended to help people get back on their feet.

⁶⁹ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-uc-management-information-march-may-2020.xlsx>

⁷⁰ Easing Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women, Women's Budget Group, May 2020
<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Easing-lockdown-.pdf>

- The five-week wait should be removed. If this does not happen then Advance Payments should be converted from loans to grants to ensure people are supported to get through the five-week wait without risking hardship or getting into debt.
- In Northern Ireland consideration should be given to providing an automatic grant from the Universal Credit Contingency Fund for all those claiming Universal Credit for the first time, reducing the devastating impact of the five-week wait as suggested by the CliffEdge NI Coalition.⁷¹
- Extend the suspension of benefit deductions to include Universal Credit Advance Payments.
- Amend the Universal Credit Regulations so that Maternity Allowance is treated in the same way as Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP). This can leave women in receipt of Maternity Allowance up to £5,000 worse off over 39 weeks of maternity leave relative to women in similar circumstances in receipt of SMP.
- Scrap the two-child limit in Tax Credits and Universal Credit which would help to protect against an increase in child poverty.
 - In Northern Ireland consideration could be given to providing an additional mitigation payment for families who have children and who are impacted by the two-child limit as suggested by the CliffEdge NI Coalition.
- We commend the Department for Communities for extending the existing mitigation payments for the Benefit Cap and Bedroom Tax in Northern Ireland. However, the pandemic makes it clear that a review of mitigation payments is needed to ensure a strengthened safety net to prevent and alleviate child poverty and homelessness.
- The Benefit Cap mitigation should be extended to new claimants as suggested by the CliffEdge NI Coalition. The pandemic means that increasing numbers of claimants will be subject to the benefit cap as a result of losing their jobs. Extending the Benefit Cap mitigation to new claimants will ensure people can access adequate levels of financial support during this period and beyond.
- Increase the budget for Discretionary Support, remove the income ceiling, extend the eligibility criteria and make more payments as grants rather than loans.
- Continue the pause for deductions for benefit debts (without pausing deductions for child maintenance).
- Increase the level of Carer's Allowance and consider a one-off Coronavirus supplement of £20 a week to match the rise in Universal Credit as suggested by Carers UK.⁷² This would particularly benefit women who provide higher levels of care.

⁷¹ The CliffEdge NI Coalition is a group of over 100 organisations from across Northern Ireland who came together to express concerns about the end of welfare reform mitigations in March 2020. The Women's Policy Group is a Coalition member.

⁷² Carers Week (2020), 'Carers Week 2020 Research Report: The rise in the number of unpaid carers during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak', *Making Caring Visible*, (available online): https://www.carersuk.org/images/CarersWeek2020/CW_2020_Research_Report_WEB.pdf

1.5 Increasing Debt

We are already dealing with a debt crisis but the Coronavirus pandemic will add many more people to the numbers in debt and in need of help to resolve problem debts. This increasing level of debt has the potential to stifle economic recovery and mean that debt advice agencies will be inundated when the impact of the crisis on people's personal finances becomes evident in the coming months.

The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic is concerning in a Northern Ireland context where levels of savings are generally lower. According to Financial Conduct Authority research⁷³ fewer adults in Northern Ireland have a savings account (52% compared to 59% in the UK). Well over half of adults in Northern Ireland (54%) have either no cash savings or savings of less than £2,000 compared with 46% in Wales, 45% in England and 43% in Scotland. A greater proportion of people in Northern Ireland than anywhere else are considered potentially vulnerable due to their financial circumstances. 56% said they could cover their living expenses for less than a week if the main source of household income was lost. This compares to the UK average of 50%. This leaves them less able to cope with any sudden change of circumstances or income shocks such as that presented by the pandemic.

Widespread job losses, reductions in income and increasing household bills as a result of the lockdown will mean that many people in Northern Ireland will have little or nothing to fall back on during this unprecedented crisis. Many people on low incomes with little or no savings who find themselves in these situations will have no other option than to borrow money. These families often struggle to manage their debts and are vulnerable to spiralling into problem debt.

StepChange debt advice charity has said that 4.6 million households risk building up dangerous levels of debt because of the pandemic. StepChange estimates that 4.6 million people will have accumulated an additional £1,076 of arrears and £997 of debt on average each because of the health crisis.⁷⁴ The charity reported that around 4.2 million people had borrowed to make ends meet, mostly by using a credit card (1.7 million), overdraft (1.6 million) or a high-cost product such as a payday loan (980,000). According to StepChange, as many as 2.7 million people have used payment holidays on mortgages and credit products that were brought in after talks between ministers and the banking industry.

While some people will undoubtedly face financial hardship as a result of the pandemic others have saved money as a result of not being able to go out socialising, shopping and saving on the costs of commuting to work. The impact of the pandemic on personal finances has been uneven. According to the Resolution Foundation⁷⁵ almost two in five high-income families (38%) have experienced budget gains in the crisis, compared with one in eight low-income households (12%).

⁷³ The financial lives of consumers across the UK, Key findings from the FCA's Financial Lives Survey 2017, Financial Conduct Authority, June 2018

<https://www.fca.org.uk/publication/research/financial-lives-consumers-across-uk.pdf>

⁷⁴ Coronavirus and personal debt: a financial recovery strategy for households, StepChange, June 2020

<https://www.stepchange.org/Portals/0/assets/pdf/coronavirus-policy-briefing-stepchange.pdf>

⁷⁵ Return to spender, Resolution Foundation, June 2020

<https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/06/Return-to-spender.pdf>

As Universal Credit will be the main benefit claimed by those who have lost their jobs, or who have suffered reduced incomes as a result of the pandemic, it is clear that existing problems with this benefit could also lead to debt problems. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children⁷⁶ shows that the crisis is causing seven in ten families with children claiming Universal Credit or Child Tax Credit to cut back on essentials, six in ten to borrow money and over five in ten to be behind on rent or other essential bills.

Research by StepChange shows that a quarter of all people in Britain who receive Universal Credit are facing very serious debt problems. This figure is three times the rate in the general population (8%) and 11% more than those receiving legacy benefits (14%). Two thirds of StepChange clients say being on Universal Credit has made budgeting and financial management more difficult.

Citizens Advice reports⁷⁷ that in a survey of those who applied for Universal Credit as a result of the Coronavirus outbreak, more than half (53%) have faced hardship during the five week wait for their first payment. The five-week wait for Universal Credit has been described as “*a real shock for people navigating the benefits system for the first time*” by a welfare adviser in Citizens Advice in evidence to the Work & Pensions Committee. The five-week wait has been widely criticised since Universal Credit was introduced putting an enormous strain on people both financially and emotionally.

This looming debt crisis is likely to impact on women who are already more vulnerable to poverty. Women are more likely than men to claim social security benefits, more likely to be in low-paid, part-time and insecure work, more likely to be providing care for children and other family members and more likely to have to make up for cuts to services through unpaid work. This keeps their incomes lower and leaves them vulnerable to short-term financial problems or income shocks. Borrowing and debt is therefore far from gender neutral and women are more likely to have to rely on borrowing to make ends meet. Many women who are struggling financially on benefits and low-income work are vulnerable to high-cost credit and in some cases this can lead to a never-ending spiral of debt.

Pre-lockdown research by the Women’s Regional Consortium⁷⁸ on women’s access to lending showed that 87% of the women involved in the research needed to borrow money in the last three years. Most had little or no savings or the ability to save due to low income or living on benefits.

⁷⁶ A lifeline for our children: Strengthening the social security system for families with children during this pandemic, Briefing by Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children, June 2020 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/file/55316/download?token=zdQGDbBp&filetype=briefing>

⁷⁷ Coronavirus claimants facing further hardship in wait for Universal Credit, Citizens Advice Press Release, 10 June 2016 <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/how-citizens-advice-works/media/press-releases/coronavirus-claimants-facing-further-hardship-in-wait-for-universal-credit/>

⁷⁸ Making Ends Meet: Women’s Perspectives on Access to Lending, Women’s Regional Consortium, February 2020 <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Making%20Ends%20Meet%20-%20Women%27s%20Perspectives%20on%20Access%20to%20Lending.pdf>

Other pre-crisis ONS data⁷⁹ shows that women are consistently more vulnerable to poverty. 39% of women and 34% of men reported it was a struggle to keep up with bills some or most of the time, 26% of women and 23% of men said they ran out of money by the end of the month, and 29% of women and 23% of men said they would not be able to make ends meet for a month or less if they lost their main source of income. Single parents are likely to be particularly affected by this and in Northern Ireland the majority of single parent households are headed by a woman (91%).⁸⁰

A survey by Turn2US⁸¹ on the impact of Coronavirus on UK households shows that the percentage of single parent families anticipating that they will have £1,000 or less in June is 66%, up from 54% in February. That equates to 1.2 million single parents anticipating that they will be living on £1,000 or less in June, an increase of 216,000 compared to February, before Covid-19 measures began. An alarming 42% of single parents are anticipating living on less than £500 per month.

Gingerbread research⁸² shows that few single parents have a financial buffer with almost six in ten (59%) rarely or never saving money while approximately half view keeping up with their bills and credit commitments as at least a 'constant struggle.' Gingerbread found that most single parents had to make cutbacks or borrow money to keep up with their bills and credit commitments, whether unexpected or routine, and to fund essential or standard items.

Debt advice agencies report that single parents may be particularly vulnerable to debt as they are more likely to be in low-paid and part-time work as well as disproportionately impacted by welfare reform and increases in the cost of living. StepChange reports that single parents are over-represented amongst their debt clients compared to the UK population. Single parents made up 23% of their clients in 2018 yet represent only 6% of the UK population. 85% of their single parent clients are female.⁸³ In Northern Ireland Christians Against Poverty (CAP) report that 27% of their clients are single parents (25% of which are single mothers).⁸⁴

For a variety of reasons including low-incomes, job losses, reductions in working hours and caring commitments this pandemic will cause many women to suffer financial hardship and debt. Many

⁷⁹ Early indicator estimates from the Wealth and Assets Survey: Bills and Credit Commitments, April 2018 to September 2019, Office for National Statistics, April 2020
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/datasets/earlyindicatorsestimatesfromthewealthandassetssurveybillsandcreditcommitments>

⁸⁰ Census 2011 – Key Statistics for Gender, Research and Information Service Research Paper, Ronan Savage and Dr Raymond Russell, Northern Ireland Assembly, 5 September 2014

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2015/general/3415.pdf>

⁸¹ Turn2US Insight Briefing: Coronavirus, Turn2US, May 2020

https://www.turn2us.org.uk/T2UWebsite/media/Documents/Communications%20documents/Insight-briefing_12_05_2020_v4.pdf

⁸² Scraping and Saving, Gingerbread, May 2019 <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/publications-index/scraping-and-saving/>

⁸³ Life Happens, Understanding financial resilience in a world of uncertainty, StepChange, July 2019
<https://www.stepchange.org/Portals/0/assets/pdf/life-happens-safety-nets-stepchange-debt-charity.pdf>

⁸⁴ Client report, Changing perceptions, Northern Ireland edition, Christians Against Poverty, April 2019
<https://capuk.org/filesserver/downloads/general/Client-Report-2019-NI-WebDP.pdf>

women will have struggled to meet the additional living costs associated with being at home during lockdown, many will get into debt or further into debt and many will struggle to meet their existing debt repayments both coming out of lockdown and well into the future.

It is clear that many people, including many women, will also struggle once job support and temporary forbearance measures are withdrawn. Many will have borrowed to get by and those who have had payment holidays or bills suspended during lockdown will face high interest rates and the potential for spiralling debts. There are a range of actions which should be taken to provide protection against hardship and debt coming out of this pandemic. While the costs of implementing these actions may act as a barrier the costs of not taking action will ultimately be much higher.

Recommendations to take action to protect people from getting into problem debt as a result of the pandemic:

- Households struggling with arrears and debt should be provided with strong protections against unaffordable repayment demands and housing insecurity. Government should extend the existing (time-limited) protections and forbearance measures on a range of credit repayments, benefit debt repayments and in housing (including mortgage holidays, increases in Local Housing Allowance rates, extending notice to quit periods, etc). This would provide a sustainable route back to normality over a manageable period for households whose incomes recover but who are left with a backlog of debt.
- Flexible terms are needed once payment holidays end to prevent a 'cliff edge' for people who have to start paying back their debts. Government should work with stakeholders to develop a package of protections for those negatively affected by Coronavirus which allows them a safe route out of difficulty including allowing for repayments to be made at an affordable level without increasing their debt or incurring poor credit ratings.
- Many people will have turned to high-cost credit to make ends meet since the crisis began. Financial support through the benefits system and through crisis payments is central to preventing crisis borrowing but the need for alternatives to high-cost credit is more pressing than ever. Government should work with charities, financial institutions and other investors to introduce or underwrite the development of schemes to provide low or no interest loans to help those on the lowest incomes access affordable credit.
- Providing short-term relief on debt repayments and evictions is not enough and in many cases will simply defer arrears until a later date. We agree with StepChange who have recommended that in order to be effective in tackling the debt crisis as a result of the pandemic Government must provide financial support. Government should establish a central fund to enable grants for those households negatively impacted by Coronavirus to address arrears and debts accumulated to pay for essential costs during the crisis. The fund should be reserved for the worst affected where realistic chances of repayment may not exist.
- Reforms to Universal Credit including extending the increase to the standard allowance, ending the five-week wait, converting Advance Payments to grants instead of loans and

extending the suspension of benefit deductions to include Universal Credit Advance Payments.

- In Northern Ireland existing welfare mitigations should be strengthened to include new challenges such as Universal Credit (which has seen big increases in claimants as a result of the pandemic).
- The budget for Discretionary Support should be increased, the eligibility criteria should be relaxed including the removal of the income ceiling and more payments should be made as grants instead of loans.
- Sufficient funding should be made available to debt advice agencies to not only continue with their free debt advice services but also to expand in order to meet increasing demand as a result of the pandemic.
- Government should acknowledge and support the role of community-based women-only provision in addressing women's poverty and financial vulnerability in disadvantaged and rural areas. This should include a commitment to increase and provide longer-term funding for grassroots women's organisations to enable them to continue and develop the vital services they provide to financially vulnerable women and their families in disadvantaged areas.

1.6 Childcare

The Women's Policy Group supports the Childcare for All Campaign and believes that a universal, free and high quality childcare provision, which meets the diverse needs of children, is essential for economic recovery in Northern Ireland. This is fundamental to facilitating women's participation and ability to access paid work, education and training and progressing gender equality in paid and unpaid work.

Like many other aspects of society, great inequalities existed that have now been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and childcare is no exception to this. Many women faced stark choices between their work and childcare commitments, as school closures and limited access to childcare settings created significant challenges for families. Women are more likely to be forced to care for children, either in addition to their work, or instead of paid work. This applies particularly to parents of disabled children, as childcare options are extremely limited even in ordinary circumstances. This increases the risk of poverty and is also likely to have health impacts for parents. Crucially, additional economic support is required for parents and carers who are isolating due to a family member showing symptoms or are looking after a child or relative with COVID-19, especially for single parents, the vast majority of whom in Northern Ireland (91%) are women.

We know anecdotally of families who have faced stark choices between losing employment or leaving young children at home alone, or presenting health risks to grandparents where no other care is available. The risks are increased for women who are key workers in low-income positions

in care, cleaning and retail, or other essential positions such as teachers, as childcare for all key workers was not fully implemented and many parents were forced to risk being infected due to the nature of their work. Economically, we know that gender segregated markets in Northern Ireland sees women overrepresented in the hospitality and leisure sectors and subsequently, women face disproportionate ramifications of the health risks and economic crisis.

Whilst the Job Retention Scheme, amendments to Universal Credit and other benefits and expansion of the definition of key workers did provide a degree of support for some women, a longer-term plan is required to ensure all women affected by job losses can provide for themselves and their families both now and in the recovery phase. To do this, an adequate childcare provision is crucial. As Northern Ireland transitions to recovery planning, many welcome the steps to easing the COVID-19 lockdown. However, it is extremely concerning that the issue of access to childcare was completely absent from the NI Executive Roadmap to recovery; an alarming omission that was also the case in the UK and Ireland recovery roadmaps.

Access to childcare is a key part of our economic infrastructure and it is necessary for people to be able to return to work place settings, and for those working from home, and is a key component to any pathway to recovery. It will not be possible to transition to a stage where the lockdown is fully lifted without childcare being treated as a major factor in being able to do this⁸⁵.

It is essential for governments to look ahead to the future sustainability of childcare and consider what policies are needed to create a strong, secure childcare infrastructure that supports the rebuilding of the economy. Research suggests that as many as 10,000 childcare settings may be unable to reopen after COVID-19, as roughly 75% blamed financial difficulties and 25% referenced fears of parents being able to afford or need the childcare they had previously employed⁸⁶. This is particularly concerning as many childcare providers and parents in Northern Ireland rightly raised their frustrations that as of 18th June 2020, only 5% of the £12 million financial support package for childcare has been allocated⁸⁷.

Research from the Nevin Economic Research Institute found that despite the fact that 40% of families in Northern Ireland (around 350,000 workers) have dependent children, little consideration appears to be given to the misalignment between the reopening of many sectors of

⁸⁵ See Childcare for All Campaign Statements on Childcare and COVID-19: <https://www.childcareforallni.com/post/childcare-for-all-campaign-childcare-critical-to-families-and-economy> (June 2020); <https://www.childcareforallni.com/post/childcare-for-all-campaign-covid-19-statement> (May 2020).

⁸⁶ See: Richard Adams (April 2020), 'UK childcare industry 'crushed' by coronavirus crisis', *The Guardian*, (available online): <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/24/childcare-industry-crushed-by-coronavirus-crisis> [accessed 23.06.20]; see also: Christine Berry, (May 2020), 'If we need childcare to reopen the UK economy, why is it so undervalued?', *The Guardian*, (available online): <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/23/childcare-reopen-economy-children-school-coronavirus> [accessed 23.06.20].

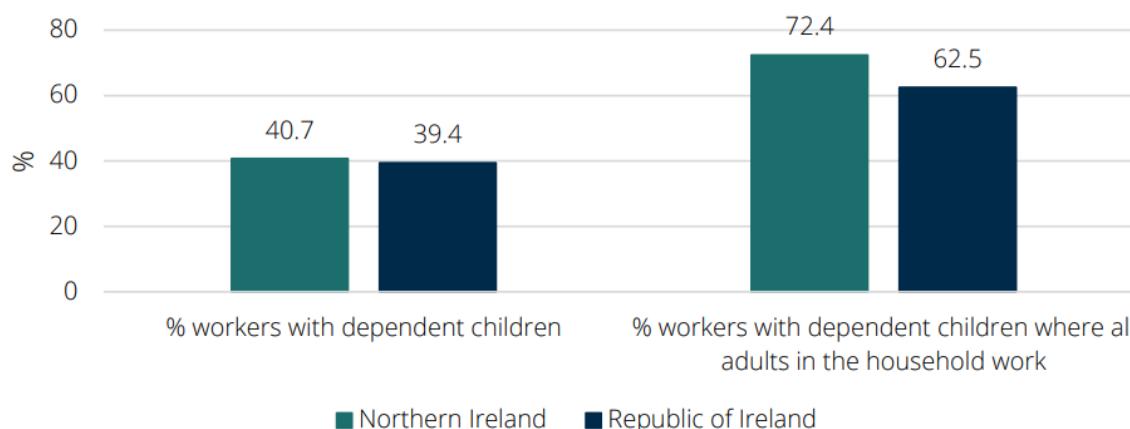
⁸⁷ Robbie Meredith, (June 2020), 'Coronavirus: Only 5% of £12m Stormont Childcare Scheme Spent', *BBC News*, (available online): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-53083774> [accessed 23.06.20].

our economy while childcare options remain extremely limited⁸⁸. As highlighted under the gender segregation and care work section of this pillar, many families rely on support from other family members for childcare to enable them to access the workforce. NERI research indicates that families in NI use the following types of childcare⁸⁹:

- Family - 47%
- Nursery - 26%
- Out of School - 18%
- Childminder - 4%
- School - 4%
- Other - 1%

Clearly, greater understanding of the diverse needs of families, intergenerational relationships and childcare support within families is needed to ensure barriers to work, education and training are removed. Figure 15 from NERI compares the situation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Figure 15: Employment and Dependent Children in NI and ROI



Source: Estimates for Northern Ireland are obtained from Q4 2019 data in the Northern Ireland element of the UK Labour force Survey. Estimates for the Republic of Ireland are obtained from 2019 data of the Labour Force Survey.

Note: It is worth noting that the data relating to Northern Ireland includes the number of workers with dependent children under the age of 16 who live in households where all adults in the household work. The data for Republic of Ireland counts only those who live in households comprised of couples with dependent children under the age of 15).

Source: NERI Employment, Dependent Children and Access to Childcare During the COVID-19 Crisis Research InBrief No. 76 May 2020, p.4.

⁸⁸ Dr Lisa Wilson, (May 2020), 'Employment and access to childcare during the Covid-19 crisis', *Nevin Economic Research Institute*, (available online): <https://www.nerinstitute.net/research/employment-and-access-childcare-during-covid-19-crisis> [accessed 23.06.20], p.3.

⁸⁹ Idib, p.5.

Research from the Fawcett Society, UK Women's Budget Group and academics also suggests that half of parents with young children are struggling to make ends meet and women key workers face significantly more anxiety and under pressure to work⁹⁰. Additional findings on parents and key workers' concerns include:

- In the next three months, 51% of parents of under-11s say they will struggle to make ends meet; this rises to 56% for single parents,
- 43% of households with young children have nearly run out of money compared to 18% of other respondents,
- Almost half (48%) of parents of young children say they are worried about how they will pay their rent or mortgage,
- 57% of parents of under-11s believe they will come out of COVID-19 with more debt than before,
- 61% of women respondents are key workers compared to 43% of men,
- 32% of women, compared to 15% of men, say their employer is pressuring them to continue to work outside the home,
- 57% of women working outside the home say that they cannot afford to stay at home; compared to 34% of men,
- 41% of women working outside the home say they have additional workload due to COVID-19, compared to 28% of men.

The economic impact of COVID-19 has been severe, and the lack of an adequate childcare provision in Northern Ireland will exacerbate many of the concerns highlighted above as we move further out of lockdown and more women have to work outside the home, or struggle with unemployment. The childcare sector in Northern Ireland faces many challenges, with these challenges, the barriers for women accessing work, education and training will continue to rise.

Research from the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey in 2019 also indicated the worrying increased cost trajectory of childcare in Northern Ireland. The most recent findings pre-COVID show⁹¹:

- The cost of a week's holiday childcare for school children soared to £52 (56% increase) over the past 10 years, and now costs an average of £145 per week,
- The average cost of a full-time childcare place is £166 per week or £8,632 per year. This is an increase of 11% since 2010 when the first NI Childcare Survey was conducted,
- Families report spending an average of £137 per week on childcare. This rises to £178 where families use formal childcare only,

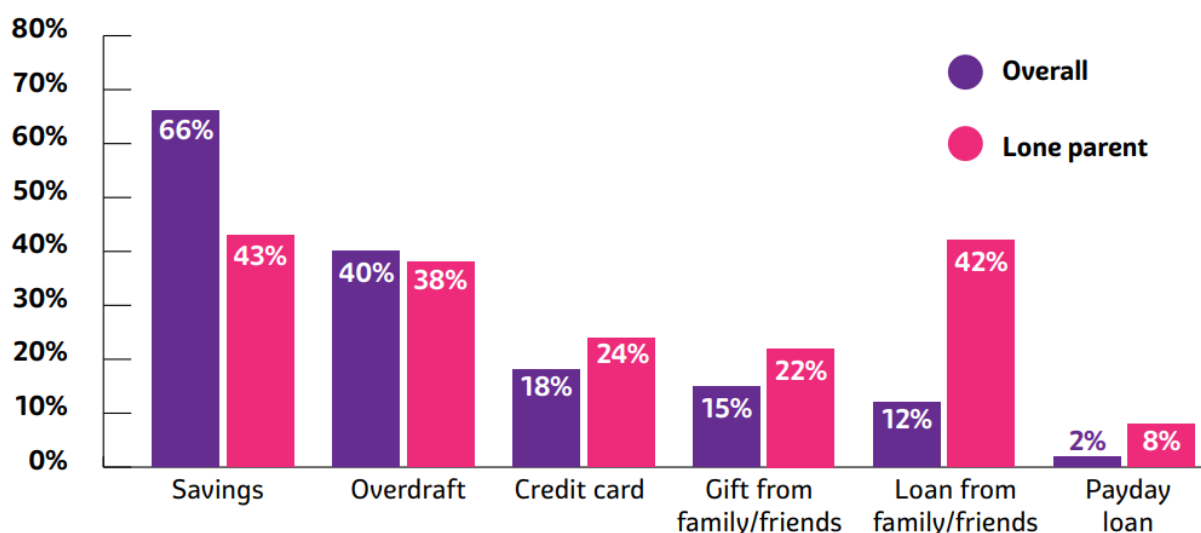
⁹⁰ UKWBG et. al., (May 2020), 'Half of parents with young children struggling to make ends meet', *UK Women's Budget Group, Fawcett Society, QMUS and LSE*, (available online): <https://wbg.org.uk/media/half-of-parents-with-young-children-struggling-to-make-ends-meet/> [accessed 23.06.20].

⁹¹ Employers for Childcare (2019), 'Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019', (available online): <https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2019/> [accessed 23.06.20].

- 50% of families report spending more than 20% of their overall household income on childcare; this rises to 63% for lone parents,
- More than one in ten lone parent households reported spending more than 50% of their overall income on childcare,
- 41% of families resorted to means other than their income to pay for their childcare needs, including savings, an overdraft, loans and credit cards; this rises to 51% for lone parents,
- Nearly half of respondents have had to cut back or go without another expense to pay their childcare bill; this rises to 63% for lone parents,
- More than 50% think there is a lack of sufficient childcare in their area and out of those, 45% say there is a lack of holiday scheme provision,
- Almost 50% of parents experienced a change in their working hours; one in five mothers decreased their hours of work or left work altogether compared to 6% of fathers,
- 45% of mothers attributed this to the cost of childcare,
- 73% of childcare providers reported an increase in their overall expenditure, compared to 29% who reported an increase in overall income,
- Pre-COVID, 32% of providers anticipated their economic positioning worsening over the next 12 months compared to only 17% who felt their position may improve,
- The majority of parents (87%) think the quality of childcare in Northern Ireland is good or very good.

The figures above are extremely concerning, especially given the drastically increased concerns of lone parents in Northern Ireland. Figure 16 below from the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019 below shows the strain childcare costs having on lone parents:

Figure 16: Means used other than income to pay the childcare bill



Source: *Employers for Childcare Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019*, p.21

A recent TUC report on ‘Forced out: The cost of getting childcare wrong’⁹² provided some further evidence and recommendations on measures to prevent widespread and unnecessary job loss among working parents. In particular, this report raised the grave concerns of

‘not having enough childcare for working parents and how the risk of this reversing decades of progress women have made in the labour market, and increasing the gender pay gap - as well as having a damaging impact on our national economic productivity’⁹³.

The WPG believes that childcare should be treated as a key part of our economic infrastructure and a public good, rather than a private family matter that is preventing many women from working. Some relevant statistics on childcare, flexible working and gender pre-COVID in England and Wales that follow patterns in Northern Ireland include:

- 54,000 women per year are forced out of work due to pregnancy and maternity discrimination⁹⁴,
- Five years after a child’s birth, only 13% of mums have increased earnings compared to 26% of dads⁹⁵,
- 56.2% of mothers had to make a change to their employment due to childcare, compared to 22.4% of fathers⁹⁶,
- 1/3 requests for flexible work were rejected by the employer⁹⁷,
- 87% of men in paid work were full-time workers compared to 59% of women⁹⁸,
- Children from low income backgrounds in England were the least likely to attend early years provision but stand to gain the most from it⁹⁹,
- Between 2008 and 2018, the cost of nursery fees rose three times faster than working parents’ wages¹⁰⁰,
- Childcare costs for lone parents working time in that same time period rose seven times faster than earnings,

In particular, we would like to reference TUC concerns¹⁰¹ that:

“as the job retention scheme winds down and employers begin to make decisions about job losses, women with caring responsibilities and those returning from

⁹² TUC (June 2020), ‘Forced out: The cost of getting childcare wrong’, TUC, (available online): <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/forced-out-cost-getting-childcare-wrong> [accessed on 23.06.20].

⁹³ Ibid, (n51), p.2.

⁹⁴ ONS (2019) Families and the Labour Market found in (n51), p.5.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ 1 TUC (2019) Good work plan: Proposals to better support families found in (n51), p.6

⁹⁸ ONS (2019) Families and the Labour Market found in (n51), p.6.

⁹⁹ DfE (2019) Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents in England 2018 found in (n51), p.9.

¹⁰⁰ TUC (2018) Childcare fees have risen three times faster than wages since 2008 <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/childcare-fees-have-risen-three-times-faster-wages-2008-tuc-analysis-reveals> found in (N51) p.9.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, (n51), p.4.

maternity leave are at higher risk of being unfairly targeted for redundancy and dismissal due to difficulties with their childcare. The Equality and Human Rights Commission have already warned that pregnant women and new mums face being made redundant during the crisis due to discrimination. Our affiliated unions are also hearing from mums returning from maternity leave who are stuck without any childcare at all, as the limited places on offer are to children already in a setting prior to Covid-19.

BME and disabled women also face intersecting barriers to equal participation in the labour market that prevent them from accessing and thriving in the labour market fairly and additional difficulties accessing childcare could intensify and damage the discrimination they face [...] the government must also do their part to ensure employers are compliant with their obligations under existing legislation such as the Public Sector Equality Duty and strengthen the rights of pregnant women, those on maternity leave and with caring responsibilities to ensure their jobs and incomes are protected.

Employers must be given clear messages from the government, highlighting existing guidance, that redundancy procedures and the criteria used must not unlawfully discriminate against workers with protected characteristics.”

It has also been reported that since the crisis began, mums are 1.5 times more likely than dads to have quit or lost their job or been furloughed¹⁰². The above statistics from the TUC coupled with the Northern Ireland specific data from Employers for Childcare, ICTU and the Nevin Economic Research Institute paint a stark picture of the growing unsustainability and crisis of childcare across the UK. This is a UK wide issue that needs urgently addressed through devolved mechanisms in any COVID-19 recovery planning.

In relation to workers in the childcare sector, there are major concerns relating to the attitudes of undervaluing care work through the underinvestment and gender segregation in the sector. Almost half of all childcare workers earn below the real living wage (48%). This is a significantly higher figure than the proportion of all workers who earn below the real living wage (30%). More worryingly, the median annual gross pay for childcare workers is almost half of that compared to the average of all workers (£11,028 compared to £21,254). This is related to the fact that not only are childcare workers likely to earn significantly less per hour worked than the average employee but they are also more likely to work on a part-time basis.

There is little evidence that experience, skills or additional qualifications will reap much reward in the childcare sector with much smaller gaps between the lowest paid and the highest paid in the sector. Specifically, the median wage at the 10th percentile is £7.36, whilst the median wage at the 80th percentile is £10.24 per hour. Owing to sample size constraints it is not possible to get an estimate at the 90th or higher percentiles. A ratio of around 1.4:1. Comparing this to

¹⁰² IFS (2020) ‘How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?’, (available online) <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14860> [accessed 23.06.20].

workers as a whole the median wage at the 10th percentile is £7.50, and £18.27 at the 80th percentile. A ratio of around 2.5:1.

If the goal of childcare policy is to make such a service more affordable and available, this cannot be at the expense of pay and conditions for workers in the sector. If childcare is to become an important and valued service, then the workers who provide that service also require to be valued. The current situation regarding pay and job quality shows that workers are underpaid and undervalued. To bring workers into the childcare sector, to maintain staff morale and reduce turnover, there needs to be significant action in properly valuing childcare workers and rewarding skills and experience.

Unionisation and collective bargaining or a system of sectoral agreements provide a mechanism to introduce a skills and wage infrastructure that could improve job quality. Previous research has shown the role that unions have historically played in introducing specificity in occupations and skills recognition. Furthermore, devolved bargaining structures such as works councils in Germany, which implement sectoral agreements at the ground level, have also been shown to give the greatest premium to low paid workers.

The evidence highlighted throughout this section on childcare is stark, and it is clear that a gendered approach to dealing with childcare is urgently needed. Northern Ireland still does not have a childcare strategy, nor a childcare provision, despite commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. The childcare sector is one facing a sustainability crisis and deep gender segregation. Focus needs to be placed on creating greater diversity within the sector to support the needs of BME families and children with disabilities, to remove stereotypes of working in childcare being seen as a “woman’s job”, and to ensure that any provision in place is one that supports the needs of women, families, children, providers and wider society.

Recommendations:

- Investing adequately, based on an informed assessment of realistic needs, to deliver a high quality childcare infrastructure that is affordable for all to access, and providers to deliver.
- Work extensively with the women’s sector and childcare sector in the development of a childcare strategy and childcare provision for Northern Ireland.
- Fully implementing the CEDAW recommendations, noting the particular reference to Northern Ireland where we call on the Government to introduce a fully costed Childcare Strategy, underpinned by legislation, that meets the needs of children, parents, childcare providers and benefits the local economy.
- Ensuring all parents and childcare providers are accessing the financial help they are entitled to.
- Address the gender segregation of the childcare sector through the creation of sectoral agreements to provide a mechanism to introduce a skills and wage infrastructure that could improve job quality.

- Promoting family friendly policies and practices across all sectors to reduce barriers to women accessing and progressing in the workforce¹⁰³.

1.7 Rural Women

Rural Women Economy - Context

Women in NI have not been afforded the opportunity to participate equally in progressing the country from a post conflict society to a peaceful society. This is having a negative impact on their social and economic development, particularly those already experiencing disadvantage, such as rural women. The onset of a global pandemic will undoubtedly exacerbate this existing inequality if Covid-19 recovery planning does not take active measures to acknowledge and redress this. It is imperative that our region has 'visible' women at decision-making level if a gender equal sustainable future is to be achieved.

Gender inequality is amplified for women in rural areas due to Access Poverty¹⁰⁴. The accessibility of education, training, work and childcare provision and the cost and availability of public transport are factors in determining women's participation; particularly in rural areas¹⁰⁵. Women in NI remain under-represented in public and political life¹⁰⁶ and rural women's participation in public and political life is further hindered by geography and distance from decision making spaces. Even recent welcome initiatives such as; 'Women in Public Life' Programme¹⁰⁷ is based in Belfast and this is echoed in the location of the majority of public appointments; even within the wider women's sector rural women still need a stronger voice¹⁰⁸ and support: *'There are also stark inequities between Government funding for service delivery to women's groups between rural and urban (1.3% v 98.7%)'*¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰³ Childcare has been identified as an issue across the world and different solutions implemented. For example in Italy, the Cura Italia economic package includes parental leave of up to 15 days paid at 50% of salary, for parents of children under 12 or children with disabilities of any age. The scheme is designed for employees in the private sector and self employed people, and the days are to be used between both parents (where relevant). Separate provision is being made for public sector workers. Parents can also request a set number of days' paid leave in each month or babysitter vouchers worth up to €600. The package also includes a €5 million ring fenced element for female entrepreneurship in a fund for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). In Belgium, paid part time parental leave schemes have been introduced

¹⁰⁴ TRPSI Framework

<https://www.daerani.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/dard/Final%20Version%20-%20Consultation%20Document%20on%20Proposals%20for%20Successor%20Framework.pdf>

¹⁰⁵ Rural Women's Manifesto *Rural Women Speak NIRWN* June 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Women and Public Appointments in NI

http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/11914.pdf

¹⁰⁷ <http://politicsplus.com/programmes/women/women-in-public-life-programme/>

¹⁰⁸ Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015)

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*.

NIRWN as the only dedicated rural women's network; provides the regional rural element of support to women through the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas Programme (funded by DAERA Rural Affairs Programmes). The vision of this Programme is: *That women living in disadvantage in both Urban and Rural will be provided with the specialist support they require to enable them to tackle disadvantage and fulfil their potential in overcoming the barriers that give rise to their marginalisation, experience of poverty and exclusion*'. An independent Evaluation of this Consortium work concluded¹¹⁰ that rural women needed additional financial support in this Programme:

'The rural investment in proportional terms is not sufficient to animate and build critical mass versus urban interests (circa 20% of staff resources in the Consortium are linked to rural delivery i.e. two 25 hour posts in NIRWN) which is out of step with the proportion of rural dwellers in NI'

As a result of no Executive in place for 3 years this has never been redressed. It is imperative that women in rural areas have proposed future budgets; Programme for government and policy recovery planning assessed for rural impacts¹² to ensure the inequity of Government resourcing does not continue. NI Government funding support for the work of the only dedicated regional service to support rural women in their communities (NIRWN) is now 13% of what it was in 2007.

Recommendations:

- Proposed budgets, PfG and policy recovery plans take account of rural needs.
- Historic underinvestment in rural women is recognised and efforts made to redress when future resourcing is being planned.
- Recognition that all Government Departments have a responsibility to deliver for rural women, not only DAERA.

Rural Business

Labour intensive businesses, or those that rely heavily upon occupations and skills deemed by governments to be non-essential, are most immediately at risk and a principal source of wider supply chain disruption, everything else being equal. In this regard, two characteristics of rural economies are pertinent. Firstly, rural areas, typically have a population distribution skewed to older people compared to urban areas¹¹¹. Older people are more likely to require critical care and/or die as a result of a coronavirus infection¹¹². There are also more older women than men as

¹¹⁰ Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015) 12 Rural Needs Act, 2016.

¹¹¹ Eurostat. Statistics on Rural Areas in the EU Eurostat; Eurostat: Brussels, Belgium, 2017

¹¹² Wu, Z.; McGoogan, J.M. Characteristics of and Important Lessons from the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Outbreak in China: Summary of a Report of 72 314 Cases From the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. JAMA 2020, 323, 1239–1242. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

women have a longer average life span. UK Government advice, which mirrors that in many other European countries, is that those aged over 70 should socially isolate, making them dependent on others in rural communities to collect shopping and medical prescriptions. It follows that self-isolating and shielding behaviour will also disproportionately impact rural areas through the availability of ('grey') labour for businesses, social enterprises and volunteer work and through the impact of their reduced expenditure on goods and services from local businesses ('grey pound'). Secondly, as labour relocates to a home working context, this could be more difficult in those rural areas suffering from inferior access to high quality broadband¹¹³. This weakness will also affect homeschooling during closures and be exacerbated by concurrent demands for limited available bandwidth (data transfer capacity) among multiple household members¹¹⁴.

COVID-19 and Rural Development

The outbreak of COVID-19 has significantly affected all aspects of life across Europe. In addition to threatening our health, the pandemic is also posing serious challenges to our socio-economic systems. In rural areas, farmers, businesses and communities are particularly affected. The COVID-19 crisis is predicted to have far-reaching consequences that will be felt for years to come. The trajectory of rural development has thus changed, and so must we. We must think differently and be ready to do "business unusual"¹¹⁵ to help rural entrepreneurs cope with economic stresses amid the pandemic. The added difficulty we face in NI is that as part of the UK we are exiting the EU and will no longer have access to EU Rural Development funding and policy development and we have no indigenous rural development policy of our own. Development of our own rural policy post Brexit has been halted to prioritising dealing with the pandemic but the timeline for the Protocol¹¹⁶ implementation and transition period to end (Jan 1 2021) remains unchanged; with a cliff edge no deal scenario still a very real possibility.

EU response

The European Commission is coordinating a common European response to the COVID-19 crisis, not only to support the healthcare systems of the EU Member States, but also to mobilise resources to support businesses hit by the crisis, including farm holdings, agri-food companies, and rural businesses. The European Commission has released their latest package of exceptional measures to further support the agricultural and food sectors most affected by the coronavirus crisis. A clear example of how this can positively impact on women is the dedicated resource

¹¹³ Commission for Rural Communities. Rural Micro-Businesses: What Makes Some Thrive in a Challenging Economic Climate? Commission for Rural Communities: Gloucester, UK, 2013. 13. OFCOM.

¹¹⁴ The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Implications for Rural Economies; Jeremy Phillipson 1,* , Matthew Gorton 1 , Roger Turner 1 , Mark Shucksmith 1 , Katie Aitken-McDermott 1 , Francisco Areal 1 , Paul Cowie 1 , Carmen Hubbard 1 , Sara Maioli 1 , Ruth McAreavey 1 , Diogo Souza-Monteiro 1 , Robert Newbery 2 , Luca Panzone 1 , Frances Rowe 1 and Sally Shortall 1; Published: 12 May 2020

¹¹⁵ International Institute of Rural Reconstruction

¹¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-protocol-on-irelandnorthern-ireland-and-political-declaration> Oct 2019

support to rural women in Georgia amid the Covid-19 pandemic¹¹⁷. NI will not be in a position to take advantage of this new resourcing and innovations.

Recommendations:

- Rural women are engaged in future rural development policy planning and development.
- Rural women have dedicated rural development resourcing that takes account of gender differentials and Covid-19 impacts.
- NI continues post Brexit to learn from EU policy development and innovation in order to replicate what is advantageous to NI.
- NI Executive work quickly on ensuring we have a future Rural Development policy that supports vibrant, gender equal, rural communities.

Rural VCSE

Rural areas have often been at the vanguard of community and social enterprise¹¹⁸, and COVID-19 is itself leading to the promulgation of many positive examples of community, neighbour and volunteer support. How public, private and third sectors effectively work together - and, crucially, how they work with the rural voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) ecosystem - is critical to immediate emergency response and will be vital to longer-term recovery. However, whilst the VCSE sector is adept at balancing social, economic and environmental needs, it has been heavily stretched in the years leading up to the pandemic and now faces a range of challenges¹¹⁹. With social shielding of older populations, who are an important source of volunteer labour, the sector too is facing challenges linked to labour availability. Thus, while the crisis offers opportunities for rural communities to make use of and to strengthen existing volunteering and neighbourliness, a weakness of the rural social support system is its reliance on older volunteers to look out for an ageing population. This sector is driven by a large number of female leaders and volunteers; largely because employment is often insecure and reliant on time bound funding.

There is a need for governments to view organisations in this sector in a similar light to private and public businesses and employees, providing financial support to sustain their viability. Support is especially justified, given that in many rural communities these organisations play the leading role in organising and supporting older, young and vulnerable residents. They may need to bolster younger volunteering and neighbourliness and repurpose older volunteering to fit with

¹¹⁷ <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/news/eu-supports-women-georgias-rural-areas-amid-covid-19-pandemic>

¹¹⁸ Steinerowski, A.A.; Steinerowska-Streb, I. Can social enterprise contribute to creating sustainable rural communities? Using the lens of structuration theory to analyse the emergence of rural social enterprise. *Local Econ.* 2012, 27, 167–182. [CrossRef] 25. Townsend, L.; Wallace, C.; Smart, A.; Norman, T. Building Virtual Bridges: How Rural Micro-Enterprises Develop Social Capital in Online and Face-to-Face Settings. *Sociol. Rural.* 2016, 56, 29–47

¹¹⁹ Milbourne, L.; Cushman, M. Complying, Transforming or Resisting in the New Austerity? Realigning Social Welfare and Independent Action among English Voluntary Organisations. *J. Soc. Policy* 2015, 44, 463–485

current restraints and the limits placed on their movement. These extra demands need external support, but the VCSE sector often falls between business, charity and household policy frameworks¹²⁰. COVID-19 serves to further emphasise the imperative for community capacity building and support through the rural VCSE sector, to allow it to help individuals, households and communities during the pandemic and recovery.

Recommendations

- Government to view organisations in this sector in a similar light to private and public businesses and employees, providing financial support to sustain their viability.
- Resourcing and support for rural community capacity building to aid Covid-19 recovery and sustainability.

Gender and the Rural Economy

The impacts of COVID-19 are experienced differently between genders¹²¹. Many of the frontline occupations affected by the virus impact disproportionately on women. Teachers, carers and nurses are predominantly women. Throughout the EU, women are predominantly responsible for childcare¹²² and home schooling is likely to have gendered implications within families. Female rural entrepreneurs and women who have undertaken farm diversification initiatives have often done so to fit around their other childcare and caring responsibilities¹²³. Maintaining these businesses while undertaking additional COVID-19 caring roles will be a challenge. There may be gendered effects that will mean differential access to household assets that can be used to buffer the effects of the coronavirus on firms. During Foot and Mouth Disease, male-owned firms were far more likely to draw on unpaid labour of household members, and female-owned businesses were less likely to use household savings to ease cash flow or to take on additional loans or debts, in order to limit risks to families and households¹²⁴. There is currently a high level of anxiety amongst rural women about the impact of lack of and cost of childcare as we move into a new school year that seems inevitable to include some form of blended learning.

Recommendations:

¹²⁰ Agapitova, N.; Sanchez, B.; Tinsley, E. Government Support to the Social Enterprise Sector: Comparative Review of Policy Frameworks and Tools; The World Bank: Washington, DC, USA, 2017.

¹²¹ The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Implications for Rural Economies

¹²² Erhel, C.; Guergoat-Larivière, M. Labor Market Regimes, Family Policies, and Women's Behavior in the EU. *Fem. Econ.* 2013, 19, 76–109.

¹²³ Shortall, S.; Sutherland, L.; McKee, A.; Hopkins, J. Women in Farming and the Agriculture Sector; Scottish Government: Edinburgh, Scotland, 2017.

¹²⁴ Phillipson, J.; Bennett, K.; Lowe, P.; Raley, M. Adaptive responses and asset strategies: The experience of rural micro-firms and Foot and Mouth Disease. *J. Rural Stud.* 2004, 20, 227–243. [CrossRef]

- Rural business support initiatives are required.
- Rural childcare solutions need to be created to support rural women business owners and workers as we move forward.

Rural Women & the Digital Economy

This is the opportune time to increase rural women's participation in the digital economy, including digital marketing and digital trade. Of course, this means that the necessary enablers must first be addressed, starting with increasing digital identification for rural SMEs to allow innovative ways of securing collateral and credit histories — for example, through the use of data from utilities, trade creditors, and purchases of inputs¹²⁵.

With the social distancing phenomena, the era of gathering rural people in groups for capacity building will end. Development organisations should adapt to ICT-based capacity building. This includes providing digital, virtual, and mobile-based business training, coaching, and mentoring related to economic recovery, digital marketing and communication channels, and overall digital financial literacy.

Recommendations:

- Increase rural women's participation in the digital economy, including digital marketing and digital trade.
- Increase digital identification for rural SMEs to allow innovative ways of securing collateral and credit histories.
- This includes providing digital, virtual, and mobile-based business training, coaching, and mentoring related to economic recovery, digital marketing and communication channels, and overall digital financial literacy.

1.8 De-commodification of Housing

The right to housing, shelter or appropriate accommodation is covered extensively by many international treaties and human rights bodies. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) guarantee the right to housing as part of the right to an adequate standard of living. This is expanded upon in the Yogyakarta Principles, which covers the application of human rights law in relation to sexual and gender minorities. The Principles state:

¹²⁵ DEVEX International Development.

“Everyone has the right to adequate housing, including protection from eviction, without discrimination and that States shall a) take all necessary legislative, administrative and other measures to ensure security of tenure and access to affordable, habitable, accessible, culturally appropriate and safe housing, not including shelters and other emergency accommodation, without discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or material or family status; b) take all necessary legislative, administrative and other measures to prohibit the execution of evictions that are not in conformity with their international human rights obligations, and ensure that adequate and effective legal or other appropriate remedies are available to any person claiming that a right to protection against forced evictions has been violated or is under threat of violation, including the right to resettlement, which includes the right to alternative land of better or equal quality and to adequate housing, without discrimination.”

Despite this right being comprehensively covered in human rights law, its application on the ground and interpretation by party states - including the UK and, more specifically, Northern Ireland - has been significantly lacking. Housing is commodified: land to be bought and sold, turned for a profit, or squeezed for as much overhead as possible. Instead of being treated as a right, it is a privilege, one to be paid for and one which can be taken from you with little warning. Those who find themselves homeless are too often moved on from public spaces by the PSNI and the support that is provided often attempts to address symptoms of the problem - such as mental illness and substance misuse - rather than addressing the issue of the lack of home in the first instance.

Human rights can never be conditional. The right to freedom from torture or inhumane treatment should not have conditions attached, and therefore neither should the right to housing. Commodifying housing by putting a price on it, encouraging profiteering through multiple property ownership leading to the exploitation of renters not only ensures the build-up of wealth at the top of our society, but also generates artificial housing shortages and housing anxiety which hurts . This ensures that individuals and families are stuck living in unsuitable and unstable housing, or no housing at all.

Naturally, this has a specifically negative impact on women, LGBT+ people, racialised people, disabled people, and working class people generally, often leading to an inability to access housing and engage with this marketised model. Many of these groups experience homelessness in disproportionate levels, often stemming from experiences of financial or other means of coercive control, domestic or sexual violence, or discrimination from private landlords. Many individuals are also trapped within coercive and abusive situations, in the knowledge that if they were to attempt to leave they would be at the mercy of an unforgiving housing market.

Recommendations:

- By restricting home ownership to one per individual as a starting point, and engaging in a process of dismantling large housing monopolies and seizing empty/derelict buildings, as well as those where tenants are living in unsustainable conditions, we can begin ensuring

that appropriate housing is available to all those that need it, and that there are no empty homes while families sleep on the streets.

- In the medium and long term, any new housing developments built should be brought under public ownership and maintained by the state, and individuals with multiple properties who profit from rental income should give up these properties and have the tenancy transferred over to the state.
- Decommodifying the housing system in this way removes the significant rent pressures on the most vulnerable in society.
- Paying for housing and property upkeep through taxation instead of inflated and unpredictable rent requests - which often line pockets instead of going towards upkeep - will mark the beginning of a move towards a Northern Ireland where each individual and family are housed appropriately, fulfilling any accessibility requirements, and tackling the propensity for abuse through financial and housing coercion.

While this process is long and requires significant political investment, it will ensure that the right to housing is meaningfully enshrined in our society, and will provide a shining example of the positive change that can come through the recovery from COVID-19 to other administrations in Ireland and the UK as well as further afield.

1.9 A Feminist Green Economy

We note the NI Executive commitments to ‘tackle climate change head on with a strategy to address the immediate and longer term impacts of climate change’ in the New Decade, New Approach agreement¹²⁶. The NI Executive commitments include¹²⁷:

- *The Executive’s strategies to reduce carbon emissions will be reviewed in light of the Paris Climate Change Accord and the climate crisis.*
- *A new Energy Strategy will set ambitious targets and actions for a fair and just transition to a zero carbon society.*
- *The Executive should bring forward a Climate Change Act to give environmental targets a strong legal underpinning.*
- *The Executive will establish an Independent Environmental Protection Agency to oversee this work and ensure targets are met.*
- *The Economic Strategy will support clean and inclusive growth and create jobs as part of a Green New Deal.*
- *The Executive will create a plan to eliminate plastic pollution.*
- *RHI will be closed down and replaced by a scheme that effectively cuts carbon emissions.*

¹²⁶ New Decade, New Approach Agreement, p.8 (available online): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf [accessed 24.06.20].

¹²⁷ Ibid, p.44.

In particular, the WPG would like to make reference to aims for a “fair and just transition” alongside the Economic Strategy that will “support clean and inclusive growth and create jobs as part of a Green New Deal”. This section of our plan will make recommendations relating to the NI Executive aims for a Green New Deal as identified above from a perspective that will support tackling gender inequality.

In recovering from COVID-19, many have discussed the need to avoid returning to the status quo, or having some sort of “new normal” being necessary. The Women’s Policy Group would agree with the need to reassess our economic priorities as we recover from COVID-19. The lockdown exposed the severe impact of governmental decisions to neglect public services on our society. Many of the existing socio-economic inequalities were exacerbated during the lockdown, as the lack of resilience or ability to cope with the ramifications of the pandemic became glaringly obvious. The need for basic levels of income, access to food, childcare, a fully-functioning health service, education, changing considerations of “low-skilled” work to essential work, recognising the importance of unpaid care, digital poverty, holiday hunger, access to the internet and many more factors have been the topic of a lot of conversations in recent months. Now, more than ever, it is necessary to reassess our economic decision making and recent history of severely under-resourced public goods. Northern Ireland would not have been able to cope without those working in the areas above, and it is necessary to recognise this undervalued work; redistribute care responsibilities and reduce the levels of harm to our social, health, economic and environmental infrastructures.

The Women’s Policy Group NI endorses the UK Women’s Budget Group and Women’s Environmental Network paper for the WBG Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, *Towards a Feminist Green New Deal for the UK*¹²⁸. As described by Cohen and MacGregor in the WBG and WEN paper, discussions on Green New Deal frameworks rarely incorporate gender, race and class¹²⁹. The UK WBG and WEN paper looks at a Green New Deal from an intersectional feminist perspective, and it is an approach that the WPG would endorse for Northern Ireland in relation to our economic recovery and the NI Executive’s aims for tackling climate change.

We have already highlighted many gender-equality priorities so far in how they align to economic decision making, and will highlight further gender equality priorities throughout the entirety of this feminist recovery plan. Before highlighting what a Feminist Green New Deal may look like, it is important to consider what Green New Deals typically include.

Typical priorities highlighted by the UKWBG and WEN include:

¹²⁸ Maeve Cohen and Sherilyn MacGregor (2020), ‘Towards a Feminist Green New Deal for the UK: A Paper for the WBG Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy’, *UK Women’s Budget Group and Women’s Environmental Network*, (available online): <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Feminist-Green-New-Deal.pdf> [accessed 24.06.20].

¹²⁹ Maeve Cohen and Sherilyn MacGregor (May 2020), ‘What would a Feminist Green New Deal look like? - Summary Briefing’, *UK WBG and WEN*, (available online): <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/A-Feminist-Green-New-Deal.pdf> [accessed 24.06.20], p.1.

- *Decarbonising the economy,*
- *Democratising the economy,*
- *Creating fair green jobs,*
- *Preserving the natural environment,*
- *Reform of finance and banking systems,*
- *Community organising and ownership,*
- *International responsibilities to repay debts and inequalities.*

In their proposed Feminist Green New Deal, these priorities would be combined with aims of gender-equality, including:

- *Redressing economic and social disadvantages faced by women,*
- *Changing social norms of gender at home and at work to share and value care,*
- *Increasing women's representation in all aspects of public life and decision-making,*
- *Ending violence against women and girls.*

The WPG would add that in the context of Northern Ireland, the need for women's involvement in peacebuilding processes should also be a priority, as set out in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security¹³⁰.

The WBG and WEN Feminist Green New Deal has several recommendations under five broad themes:

1. ***Investment in (social) infrastructure*** - including transport, housing, agriculture and social infrastructure such as jobs and training for carers and educators,
2. ***Green jobs*** - emphasising the need to be aware of reproducing occupational gender segregation and take steps to enrol women in STEM jobs crucial to a green economy,
3. ***Sharing Care*** - recognising that paid care jobs are low carbon and redress gender inequality and women undertake the majority of unpaid care work,
4. ***Democracy and Ownership*** - encouraging women's community involvement in governance, especially BAME and disabled women, as they are underrepresented in all areas of political life and this needs rectified to democratise the economy,
5. ***(Inter)national responsibilities*** - reducing and redressing international inequalities.

In the context of Northern Ireland, previous pillars in this plan have addressed the need to decommodify housing, reduce gender segregated labour markets, tackle professional clusters, redistribute disproportionate levels of care work women face and tackle rural access poverty. The WPG would also like to endorse the following evidence and recommendations from the Feminist Green New Deal:

“WBG research indicates that a 2% GDP investment in care (social care, childcare, parental leave etc.), creates double the amount of jobs for women and almost as

¹³⁰ UNSCR 1325 Women, Peace and Security.

many for men than the same investment in construction¹³¹. Investment in free universal childcare especially, returns almost all of its initial investment”¹³²

This is of particular importance to Northern Ireland given our calls for a **universal, free and high quality childcare provision**. If the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Department of Education, introduce free universal childcare, statistics from the WBG submission to HM Treasury indicate that a full return would be made on this investment through additional tax revenue generated by the additional jobs created¹³³. In addition to this, when relating the investment in social infrastructure to the environment, WBG and WEN reference Eurostat data which suggests:

“The care industry is 30% less polluting (in terms of greenhouse gas emissions) than the construction industry and, the education industry is 62% less polluting than the construction industry”¹³⁴.

Recommendations from the WBG and WEN Feminist Green New Deal, which we have applied to Northern Ireland, include:

1. Investment in (social) infrastructure:

- Co-designing social infrastructure at a local level with the needs of women taken into account,
- Taking the differing transport needs of women with caring responsibilities into account when creating transport plans; particularly given issues in Northern Ireland of inadequate rural public transport and the fact that women are more likely to rely on public transport.

2. Green Jobs:

- Provide subsidies and other incentives, including paid education leave, to support women, particularly low-income and BAME women, in accessing training and development programmes in high-skilled work in a new green economy,
- Provide subsidies and other incentives to those working in jobs at high risk of being replaced by automaton, particularly as women are at much higher risk of this,
- Encourage women and girls into male-dominated green sectors that are encouraged through a Northern Ireland Green New Deal.

3. Sharing Care:

- Recognising the dual-benefit job creation and increased tax revenue through investing in paid care jobs that are already done in an unpaid capacity by majority women,

¹³¹ ITUC (2016), ‘Investing in a Care Economy: A gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries’, *ITUC*, (available online): https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/care_economy_en.pdf [accessed 24.06.20].

¹³² Ibid, (n83), p.1.

¹³³ Women’s Budget Group (February 2020), ‘Budget Representation to HM Treasury: Invest in *Social Infrastructure*’, *UK Women’s Budget Group*, (available online): <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/WBG-Budget-2020-FINAL.pdf> [accessed 24.06.20].

¹³⁴ WBG calculations from Eurostat data: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database> found in *ibid*, (n83), p.1.

- Through increased investment in care jobs and the care sector, not only will women's employment and economic opportunities increase, but children from disadvantaged backgrounds will benefit from increasing qualities of childcare and education,
- Broaden definitions of 'green jobs' beyond construction and technology to incorporate the care sector as an already existing low carbon, high compensate sector that is increasingly neglected,
- Ensure that all green jobs in Northern Ireland include a real living wage, are securely contracted, ethically procured and unionised,
- Implement a 30-hour paid work week in recognition of unavoidable unpaid care,
- Actively encourage and incentivise care leave and caring responsibilities being undertaken by men,
- Establish a Universal Basic Income or Universal Basic Services to ensure minimum living standards and recognise and remunerate the £4.6 billion unpaid carers contribute to Northern Ireland each year,
- Balance recommendations for greater food self-reliance with recognition of the gendered, unpaid and low-paid labour involved in producing and providing food, particularly as Northern Ireland may be disproportionately impacted by different food standards to Great Britain post-Brexit,
- Supporting and developing sustainable small businesses that reduce domestic work through mass preparation and distribution of locally grown food.

4. Democracy and Ownership:

- Promoting economic, ecological and carbon education campaigns for schools and the wider public to be adequately funded through a Climate Change Act and within the Programme for Government,
- Ensure equality impact assessments of all environmental policies and ensure consultation on policies with groups representing various genders, races and classes within civil society,
- Make socio-economic equality of protected characteristics a key goal of any new green new deal framework and ensure co-design of planning and policies with the Women's Sector,
- Promote a cultural shift towards valuing care as a key part of the infrastructure of the environment and economy.

5. (Inter)national Responsibilities:

UK Level:

- Ending the hostile environment in the UK towards migrants and fully remove information exchanges between public bodies (including those in Northern Ireland) and the Home Office,
- Promote fair tax policies which close tax loopholes, redistribute wealth between women and men and hold transnational corporations to account for exploitation of people and harm to the planet¹³⁵,
- Introduce a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland,

Devolved:

¹³⁵ Examples provided by the WBG and WEN include a fossil fuels tax for corporations, a financial transaction tax and reforms of progressive taxation like income and corporation tax, (n83), p.3.

- Protecting human rights, including sexual rights, reproductive rights, and working rights,
- Promote trade justice within supply chains and create ethical procurement guidelines in line with the above recommendations.

We have endorsed the above recommendations from the WBG and WEN Feminist Green New Deal and applied them to Northern Ireland and the aims of the NI Executive. In any forward planning for the future of Northern Ireland, the climate needs to be considered. The above recommendations would support the NI Executive in meeting the requirements set out in New Decade, New Approach, whilst applying a gender lens to support a care economy and gender equality in any new green economy.

1.10 Paramilitarism, Gate Keeping and Control of Funding

Paramilitarism is a reality in Northern Ireland, and one that persists fully 22 years after the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. It is a particularly thorny problem because the reality of our history means that it is difficult to draw a line under the legacy of the violence of the past and those who were involved with it. Paramilitary organisations continue to exist, despite, in most cases, ceasefires being in place and the conflict being behind us. Further, many of those who are involved in paramilitary activity are not the same actors that were involved during the conflict, and the activities that continue to come under the umbrella name of “paramilitary activity” are not the same as those carried out during the conflict.

It is unclear how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact upon paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland, particularly whether lockdown will have further entrenched the influence of these groups in local communities or not. Nonetheless, the time has come to face the continued paramilitary activity that exists. Evidently, these organisations continue to recruit new members, and to engage in activities that would ordinarily be categorised as common criminality; **loan-sharking, protection rackets, and drug dealing.**

Justice Minister, Naomi Long, has signalled her intention to introduce Unexplained Wealth Orders, which should be in place in October 2020, while also recognising that “This will involve a complex programme of work, covering the production of Codes of Practice, Court Rules and secondary legislation, some of which will need to be made at Westminster”.

This is a welcome change, but it is vital that these are used properly and wherever appropriate to tackle paramilitarism. Another, and arguably more difficult barrier, is the concern that there may be a lack of political will to truly uproot the paramilitary organisations behind some of this criminality.

Paramilitary run organisations continue to act as community organisations within many vulnerable communities and many are in receipt of public money. These same community workers and organisations can act as gatekeepers within their communities, choosing favoured

organisations to work alongside and choking off support to groups that may challenge or question paramilitary influence. These organisations are often highly male-dominated, leading to the silencing of women's voices within the local community and reinforcing gender divisions. This problem has been further exacerbated by the UK's refusal to apply UNSCR 1325 to the Northern Ireland conflict.

We need more robust and routine checks on the bona fides of community organisations to screen out those with active involvement in ongoing paramilitary and/or criminal activity. It is unacceptable that public money should contribute to the coffers of organisations that have associations with criminal elements, while groups doing genuine peacebuilding work suffer through lack of support.

With regards to paramilitary activity, paramilitaries are known to be involved in loan sharking and this particularly impacts upon those with limited incomes, especially women, as shown in research carried out by Women's Support Network.

Recent research by the Independent Reporting Commission, compiled by Monica McWilliams, confirms that paramilitary activity remains a constant issue in Northern Ireland, and laments that civil society has apparently learned to live with it. She describes the situation as one of "coercive control" of entire communities¹³⁶.

The Paramilitary Crime Task Force has arrested multiple individuals but has not been able to stamp out the organisations themselves. More robust action against these organisations would actually free up money to be invested in the communities that are currently being harmed by this coercive control, many of which have some of the worst levels of deprivation in the UK and even in Europe.

¹³⁶ See: <https://www.ircommission.org/>

2. Health Pillar

As measures to ease the lockdown are further implemented, many are worried about the real risk of a second wave of COVID-19 infections across the UK. A group of UK health leaders including presidents of the Royal College of Physicians, Surgeons, GPs and Nursing and the chair of the British Medical Association have written a letter addressed to the leaders of the UK political parties stating:

“The available evidence indicates that local flare-ups are increasingly likely and a second wave is a real risk. Many elements of the infrastructure needed to contain the virus are beginning to be put in place, but substantial challenges remain. The job now is not only to deal urgently with the wide ranging impacts of the first phase of the pandemic, but to ensure that the country is adequately prepared to contain a second phase [...]

As stakeholders and leaders of the UK’s medical, nursing and public health professions, we urge you to establish a [public inquiry] review. We think there’s a strong case for an immediate assessment of national preparedness, with the first results no later than August”¹³⁷

The WPG shares concerns of a second wave of COVID-19, and we support the call for an inquiry into national preparedness. As previously stated, in Northern Ireland (opposite from the global trend) women are more at risk of dying from COVID-19 in Northern Ireland than men. Therefore, the physical health implications for women in Northern Ireland are significant and dire. Additionally, we would like to raise concerns of the detrimental mental health and additional physical health implications many women, girls, femme-identified and nonbinary people, racialized women/women of color and immigrant women in Northern Ireland have faced as a consequence of the lockdown, highlight how this is likely to worsen in the coming months, and propose recommendations to mitigate against the negative health ramifications.

2.1 Mental Health Concerns due to COVID-19

Along with the vital physical health considerations, one of the most concerning health implications from the COVID-19 lockdown is the impact on women’s mental health. WPG is deeply concerned that out of a total £90 million health allocation, just £1.5 million was requested for the Mental Health Action Plan by Health Minister Robin Swann. The health foundation states that ‘good mental health is an asset and is also linked to good physical health - both of which

¹³⁷ Victor Adebawale et. al. (June 2020), ‘COVID-19: Call for a rapid forward looking review of the UK’s preparedness for a second wave - an open letter to the leaders of all UK political parties’, *The British Medical Journal*, (available online): <https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m2514> (accessed 25.06.20).

support positive social and economic outcomes for individuals and society¹³⁸. Northern Ireland has faced a mental health crisis for several years, and this is likely to have worsened due to the lockdown. Urgent measures need to be taken to address this crisis and support the women impacted by poor mental health in Northern Ireland.

In doing this, it is essential to recognise that poor mental health is strongly associated with social and economic circumstances, including living in poverty, low-quality work, unemployment and housing.¹³⁹ In addition, studies from past viral outbreaks show well-documented increases in mental health disorders. The drivers for this include social isolation, job and financial losses, housing insecurity and quality, working in a front-line service, loss of coping mechanisms and reduced access to mental health services. As previously stated in this document, women are disproportionately represented in poverty, social housing, and employment related to frontline services and care-giving.

Medical professionals have warned that existing health inequalities are likely to widen without urgent action to support the most vulnerable to the economic and other effects of social distancing measures¹⁴⁰. We welcome the recently announced Mental Health Action Plan by the Department of Health, although it is extremely disappointing to see that considerations have not been given towards the increased mental health difficulties faced by the LGBT+ community (particularly trans individuals), disabled women, racialised women and other groups that face social isolation and vast health inequalities. A policy that applied to all is not enough to address the health inequalities faced by marginalised groups and much more nuanced, intersectional approaches are needed to support these groups.

Mental health care cannot ignore race, gender, sexuality, or disability, and mental health professionals must be culturally competent in the language and experiences of women in these communities in order to properly care for them. For the women in these communities, not only are there significant barriers to accessing these services as a result of lengthy waiting times and inaccessible referral pathways, but once having accessed the services, there is not a guarantee that their experiences will be understood or affirmed due to lack of training and experience. The Department of Health should specifically ring-fence funding for the development of cultural competency within mental health services in direct collaboration with community organisations that represent these women.

Some of the marginalised groups we would recommend urgent mental health support, through increased access to mental health services; specialised medical interventions and higher levels of specialised support include:

¹³⁸ Louise Marshall et. al. (June 2020), 'Emerging evidence on COVID-19's impact on mental health and health inequalities', *The Health Foundation*, (available online): <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/blogs/emerging-evidence-on-covid-19s-impact-on-mental-health-and-health> [accessed 25.06.20].

¹³⁹ Ibid, (n99).

¹⁴⁰ Margaret Douglas et. al. (April 2020), 'Mitigating the wider health effects of covid-19 pandemic response', *The British Medical Journal*, (available online): <https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m1557> [accessed 25.06.20].

Victims of Domestic and Sexual Violence

Between July 2018 and June 2019, **there were 16,575 domestic abuse crimes recorded** in Northern Ireland - the highest since records began in 2004/05. The lockdown has exacerbated domestic violence (“DV”) against women, with four deaths in Northern Ireland attributed to DV since the lockdown began.¹⁴¹ Domestic violence often involves a pattern of coercive control and manipulation that can lead to extensive mental health trauma including a loss of self-esteem, depression and isolation.

Victims of domestic violence require specific and appropriate mental health services, including safety planning, therapy, and/or counseling. These services should be available to the victim regardless of whether or not she is currently in a relationship with the abuser. The services should be provided by people trained in the dynamics of domestic violence. Some of these services are currently being provided (for example through organisations such as Women’s Aid), but should be expanded and funded as a matter of urgency due to the increased risk of DV as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Victims of sexual violence also require appropriate therapy and counseling services. Any person who self-identifies as a victim of sexual violence should be able to access services from therapists trained in trauma informed care and victim responses to sexual violence. These services should be provided within a timely manner and prioritised as a matter of urgency.

We recommend that specific funding is allocated for appropriate, safe and rapid therapeutic services to victims of domestic violence and sexual violence.

LGBT+ People

LGBT+ communities in Northern Ireland experience mental health issues at disproportionately high levels due to widespread social stigma, abuse, and institutionalised homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. Mental health issues within the community are exacerbated in a myriad of ways by statutory services which fail to meet their needs including: failure to adequately fund and competently advertise sexual & reproductive health services, leading to significant HIV/STI anxiety; failure to provide transition-related-care for trans individuals in a timely and culturally competent manner; failure to fund access to IVF for lesbian and bisexual couples; failure to enforce equality legislation in schools and adequately clamp down on anti-LGBT+ bullying; failure to address poverty, homelessness, and criminalising drug use; among many others.

These issues, compounded with the chronic underfunding of mental health services and lack of cultural competency within such, has led to a mental health crisis within LGBT+ communities. This manifests itself in a variety of different mental health issues, such as depression, suicide, substance abuse, self-harm, unemployment and homelessness.

¹⁴¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-52440662>

We must adequately fund mental health services and engage in meaningful codevelopment and coproduction of training and service provision with LGBT+ communities. Specifically, LGBT counselling and mental health services should be funded and delivered in collaboration with community organisations (including those already doing this work, i.e. Rainbow). Service providers need to be specifically trained on supporting LGBT people, with this training delivered by/developed with LGBT community orgs. For trans people, mental health support, community support, and access to gender affirming care should have clear and defined pathways between them and be integrated in such a way that improves access to all while not requiring access to mental health care as a prerequisite to other care.

We must also recognise that the disproportionate mental health issues within LGBT+ communities are not inevitable, and are contributed to significantly by the institutionalised issues explored above. In order to improve the mental health of LGBT+ communities, the conditions which led to that poor health must be addressed.

Going forward, we recommend:

- Improving access to culturally competent sexual health services (reducing STI/HIV anxiety);
- Decommodifying housing and ensuring quick access to alternative accommodation in cases of DV/SV/homo- + trans-phobia from housemates and family;
- Improving cultural competency within drug cessation services, safe injection rooms, etc;
- Removing crisis/mental health response from PSNI duties, developing emergency community healthcare support for mental health crisis situations;
- Reducing poverty through significant investment in welfare;

2.2 Women with Caring Responsibilities and Dependents

With the rapid increase in the numbers of women with caring responsibilities across the UK due to COVID-19, urgent action is needed to address the mental health concerns of carers. As the majority of carers are also in paid employment, if action is not taken to support this group, it is likely to have long-term detrimental impacts on workforces. Some statistics on impact of increased caring responsibilities during COVID-19 from the Carers Week report includes¹⁴²:

The top three most frequently chosen challenges by all unpaid carers:

- managing the stress and responsibility (71%)
- the negative impacts on their physical and mental health (70%)

¹⁴² Ibid, (n52), p.7.

- not being able to take time away from caring (66%).

These results closely matched what the public, who had never been unpaid carers, thought the challenges that unpaid carers face were:

- not being able to take time away from caring (72%)
- managing the stress and responsibility (70%)
- the negative impacts on their physical and mental health (69%).

There were other important challenges that were frequently chosen by unpaid carers:

- the impact it has on other personal relationships (eg with family, friends, partners etc.) (63%)
- the negative impact it has on their ability to do paid work (55%)
- the financial impact of the additional care costs (eg specialist care equipment, home adaptations (53%)
- not having anyone to talk to about the challenges of caring (50%).

The general public, who don't have a caring role, were asked what worries they would have if they took on an unpaid caring role. Their top three worries were:

- The negative impact on their own physical and mental health (56%)
- Not being able to cope financially, not being able to afford care services or equipment required (50%)
- Not knowing or understanding what help is available to carers (49%).

For too long, women and unpaid carers have provided social support that upholds the health and wellbeing of society whilst propping up the NI economy to the value of £4.6 billion per year. Earlier in this plan, statistics were given of the economic benefits of investing in care for both gender equality and in addressing climate change. The needs of carers' health should be a priority in any recovery planning in Northern Ireland.

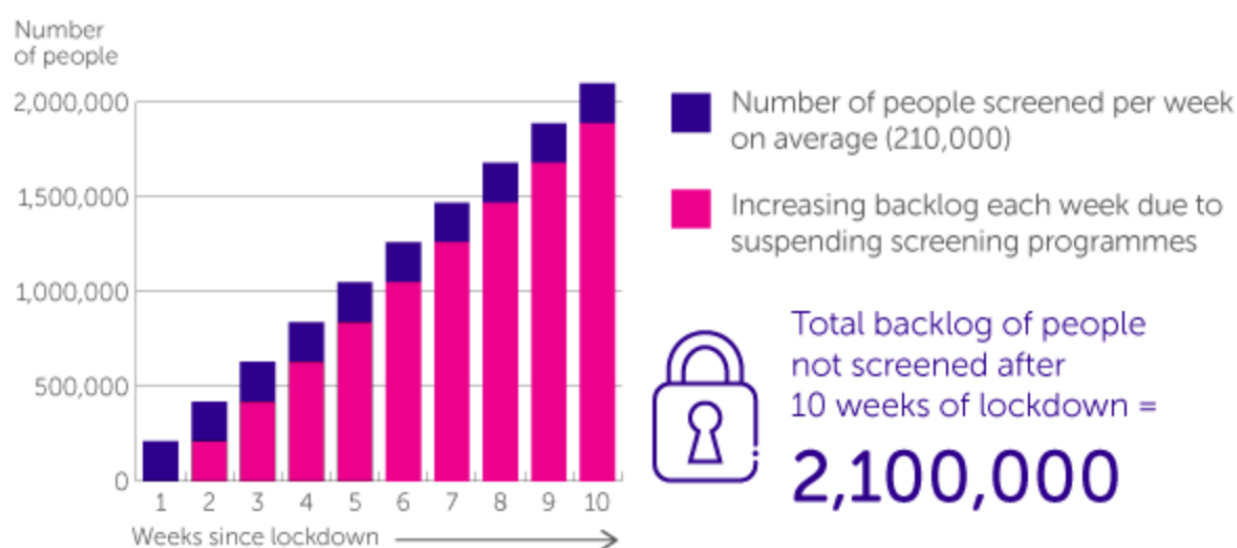
2.3 Additional Health Concerns

In addition to the increased mental health implications of the COVID-19 lockdown, there are other concerning implications on womens' physical health as a result of the lockdown, including the ramifications of cancelled cancer screenings, increased waiting lists, the on-going health impacts of austerity cuts, issues around access to abortion, maternal health, and bodily autonomy, and specific concerns for the health of immigrant women, trans women and disabled women.

Ramifications of cancelled Cancer Screenings

Cancer Research UK have highlighted their concerns over the suspension of cancer screenings and the long term impact on cancer services and individual health.¹⁴³ As of the beginning of June, more than 2 million people across the UK were waiting for screening, tests and treatments since lockdown began. Figure 17 from Cancer Research UK highlighted the backlog created by suspended cancer screenings:

Figure 17: Backlog of Cancer Screenings Due to COVID-19 Lockdown



Source: Cancer Research UK

According to Cancer Research UK, for every week that screenings are paused, 7000 people aren't being referred for further tests and 380 cancers aren't being diagnosed. While screenings have been suspended, individuals with symptoms have been less likely to go to their GP and some GPs have been reluctant to risk sending their patients to hospitals for further tests due to the risk of COVID-19. For those needing treatments across the UK (around 12,750 waiting for cancer surgery), operations have fallen to 60% of expected levels, which will also have a long-term impact. For those receiving treatment for cancer, COVID-19 testing is still necessary before their treatment can begin, and Cancer Research UK estimate that between 21,000 to 37,000 COVID-19 tests are needed each day to facilitate treatment; which can lead to further delays¹⁴⁴. Organisations such as the Women's Resource and Development Agency travel across Northern

¹⁴³ Katie Rovers, (June 2020), 'Over 2 million people waiting for cancer screening, tests and treatments', *Cancer Research UK*, (available online): <https://scienceblog.cancerresearchuk.org/2020/06/01/impact-of-coronavirus-on-cancer-services-revealed-over-2-million-people-waiting-for-screening-tests-and-treatments/> [accessed 25.06.20].

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, (n102).

Ireland to deliver sessions to increase awareness of the need for people to assess themselves and attend Breast, Cervical and Bowel cancer screenings; and these services must be prioritised as we move out of the lockdown.

Increased Waiting Lists

The issues of backlogs extends beyond cancer screenings, as the NHS Confederation has estimated that NHS waiting lists ‘could hit 10 million this year’¹⁴⁵. As a result, the NHS Confederation has made calls for urgent emergency funding and long-term spending by the UK Government. In particular, medical professionals are concerned about the uphill battle they face in restarting cancer, stroke and heart care services, while continuing to manage thousands of sick and recovering COVID-19 patients while implementing social distancing measures in health settings. Health waiting lists pre-COVID in Northern Ireland were already at crisis levels, as before the lockdown, around 130,000 people were waiting more than a year for treatment which creates real risks to patients’ quality of life and increases disease and preventable death. When compared to England and Scotland where approximately 1 in 12 people were on elective waiting lists, 1 in 5 people in Northern Ireland were on waiting lists in 2019. A potential solution for this is to create elective care centres, which may be politically and financially easier than closing sites to centralise care; given huge problems with access poverty and public transport in Northern Ireland.

2.4 Health Impacts of Austerity on Women

As stated earlier in this plan, women in Northern Ireland were disproportionately and cruelly impacted by years of austerity and welfare reform. Not only does austerity have significant impacts on economic standing, it also has been proven to have profound health impacts. Research by the British Medical Association highlights:

‘Austerity and welfare reform in the UK has resulted in substantial reductions in public spending, principally through budgetary cuts on departments and services. This has significantly affected local government funding and welfare support. The broad impact has been to hamper progress in reducing inequality and job prospects; a decrease in the number of households achieving a minimum income for healthy living; increases in relative child poverty; and increased levels of material deprivation. These factors can impact negatives on health and wellbeing in the absence of strong support systems.’¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ BBC News, ‘Coronavirus: NHS waiting lists ‘could hit 10 million this year’, *BBC News Health*, (available online): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-52984742> [accessed 25.06.20].

¹⁴⁶ BMA (2016), ‘Health in all policies: health, austerity and welfare reform: A briefing from the board of science’, *British Medical Association*, (available online): <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/2086/bos-health-in-all-policies-austerity-briefing-2016.pdf>

Evidence from countries such as Iceland, Sweden, Canada and Norway highlights the importance of maintaining high levels of public spending on social welfare and health as important mechanisms for improving health outcomes and narrowing health inequalities, while supporting long-term, sustainable economic growth.

In the context of an upcoming recession due to COVID-19, we support recommendations from the British Medical Association to:

- Increase investment in social protection systems - such as unemployment programmes, housing support and income maintenance - to counter the projected recession and austerity,
- Increase investment in healthcare and public health services in the short and long-term, including adequate funding for evidence based preventative and early intervention services.

Throughout this recovery plan, we have presented evidence of the horrific impact austerity has had on Northern Ireland. Suffering for women due to a decade of austerity was immense; socially, economically and in terms of health. In addressing the health crisis we currently face, tackling health inequalities for women and the unequal health ramifications of economic decision making needs to be a priority.

2.5 Abortion, Maternal Health and Bodily Autonomy

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. Women must also be able to access sexual and reproductive health services, including contraception, emergency contraception and the means to access safe abortion care. International human rights law explicitly recognises the rights to sexual and reproductive health and bodily autonomy. These rights give rise to positive state obligations to ensure abortion-related information and services and to remove medically unnecessary barriers that deny practical access¹⁴⁷.

Introducing additional barriers to abortion and/or failing to ensure abortion access during the COVID-19 pandemic contravenes UN treaty bodies' consistent critique of states' denial of safe abortion services, and recommendations that states both refrain from introducing new barriers and eliminate existing barriers to abortion¹⁴⁸. Women should not, and may not be able to, travel to access an abortion and healthcare workers should not be put at risk by requiring pregnant

¹⁴⁷ Center for Reproductive Rights, Breaking Ground: Treaty Monitoring Bodies on Reproductive Rights 12-14, 2020

¹⁴⁸ Abortion in the context of COVID-19: a human rights imperative, Jaime Todd-Gher & Payal K Shah <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/26410397.2020.1758394>

people to physically attend healthcare premises, this has been made clear by WHO advice. The Northern Ireland Office have so far implemented an abortion framework that is inadequate.¹⁴⁹

Further, the Department of Health has failed to commission the full abortion services provided for in the NIO regulations and has failed to enable women, girls and pregnant people to safely manage an abortion at home through telemedicine services. We need an abortion provision that is evidence-based, relies on best medical practice, and is fully implemented in the safest manner to address the difficulties around and barriers created by COVID-19. This includes telemedicine for self-managed abortions to reduce risk, provisions for those unable to take misoprostol, and full, accessible provisions for those accessing an abortion after 10 weeks gestation. The women of Northern Ireland have travelled to Great Britain to access abortions for too long, travel was considered an unviable solution by CEDAW,¹⁵⁰ therefore they should be able to fully access healthcare at home during this global pandemic.¹⁵¹

The Government has an obligation to take effective measures to protect and guarantee women, girls and pregnant persons' right to health, physical integrity, non-discrimination and privacy as they seek healthcare information and services, free of harassment and intimidation amounting to obstruction of their access to that healthcare. As access to abortion is often timebound and urgent, it is vital that exclusion / safe access zones are introduced.

Other areas of reproductive healthcare, including access to fertility treatments for lesbian and bisexual women, as well as access to timely and human rights compliant gender affirming care, are not currently guaranteed by the Department of Health and are often held behind long waiting lists and/or gatekeeping. The constraints on bodily autonomy imposed by the Department of Health on LGBT+ women must be addressed and rectified, in close partnership with organisations working directly with those communities.

In recovery planning, we recommend that the Government:

- 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, in line with CEDAW recommendations,
- Set up a dedicated fund specifically for organisations who offer contraception and nondirective information,
- Extend sexual and reproductive healthcare services across Northern Ireland to ensure equal access for all women, particularly those in rural areas,
- Ensure there are free, safe, legal and local abortion services accessible to all who want or need them,
- Introduce telemedicine for early medical abortions,

¹⁴⁹ For details on the best provision for NI, see the WPG response to the NIO Abortion Framework Consultation here: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/WPGNIOAbortionConsultation.pdf>

¹⁵⁰ For more information on the heavy financial, emotional and logistical burden of travelling to GB on women, see the CEDAW Committee comments here: <https://undocs.org/CEDAW/C/OP.8/GBR/1>

¹⁵¹ For more information, see: <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/self-care-interventions/en/>

- Introduce safe access/buffer zones,
- Ensure there is funded assisted fertility treatment for everyone who wants or needs it, including same sex couples and single women,
- Ensure there is funded perinatal mental health provision.

2.6 Health Inequalities and Hostile Environment for Migrants and Racialised People

“Black, [Asian] and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities are generally considered to be at increased risk of poor mental health (Bhui and McKenzie, 2008; UK Department of Health, 2011; Fernando, 2012) and frequently have less confidence using available services (Rooney, 2013).”¹⁵² Furthermore, Black, Asian and minority ethnic people living in Northern Ireland are at a heightened risk of discrimination and racist hate crimes in Northern Ireland.¹⁵³ Prejudice and hate crimes impart a significant psychological toll on victims. Any attempt to address the mental health needs of the Black, Asian and minority ethnic community in Northern Ireland needs to encompass a strategy to combat racism, particularly institutional racism in the health care system.

Some of the identified challenges to minority ethnic and migrant communities accessing mental health services include language barriers, discrimination, difficulty with GP registration and other aspects of accessing care, stigma associated with accessing mental health services.¹⁵⁴ Further, the culture and power dynamics of psychiatry - a field dominated by white men - can be off putting to racialised people attempting to access care.

It is also the case that, should an individual have a negative experience in accessing mental health care or any kind of health care, they will be unlikely to engage in the future. The lack of cultural competency on caring for racialised people, widespread language barriers, and the UK Government’s hostile environment policy have ensured that these off-putting negative experiences happen more often to people of colour accessing services, to the detriment of community health.

Members of the migrant community, particularly those without secure immigration status may be put off from accessing healthcare for themselves or their families during COVID-19 because of the continued operation of ‘hostile environment’ measures which have the NHS sharing migrant data with the Home Office. This impacts some of the most vulnerable women in society such as pregnant women, victims of trafficking and domestic violence and persons living with HIV.

¹⁵² See: <http://conflictresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Waking-this-thin-line-Black-and-Minority-Ethnic-BME-Experiences-of-Mental-Health-Wellbeing-in-N.Ireland.pdf>

¹⁵³ See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-53029899>

¹⁵⁴ <http://conflictresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Waking-this-thin-line-Black-and-Minority-Ethnic-BME-Experiences-of-Mental-Health-Wellbeing-in-N.Ireland.pdf>

The history of data sharing between the Home Office and the NHS differs across the UK. In England a 2016 Memorandum between the NHS, English Department of Health and Social Care and the Home Office previously allowed the Home Office to request confidential patient information for immigration enforcement purposes, including for minor immigration infractions.¹⁵⁵ This Memorandum was halted in November 2018 following condemnation from a Health & Social Care Select Committee inquiry and legal action taken by Migrant Rights Network, represented by Liberty.¹⁵⁶ UK wide data sharing continues between the NHS and the Home Office regarding migrants who have incurred a debt to the NHS.¹⁵⁷

NI legislation such as the Provision of Health Services to Persons not Ordinarily Resident Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 does not embed Hostile Environment practices in the same manner that equivalent English legislation does. However, data sharing related to migrants who have incurred debt to the NHS does apply to treatment received in Northern Ireland.

The Health Minister Robin Swann publicly said in a debate on 24 March 2020 that data on migrants/Asylum seekers accessing treatment for COVID-19 would not be passed on to the Home Office. At the same time, he also gave a (clearer) assurance that treatment would be free to everyone. This was later backed up by a response from the Minister to a written question from Gerry Carroll MLA ([AQW 3899/17-22](#)), which was answered in May 2020, almost two months after the question was first tabled. While these assurances are welcome, the atmosphere of fear created by the Hostile Environment means that this is not enough to ensure migrants will seek treatment. At no point has this information been widely publicised by the NI Executive or another public authority. A public information campaign would have allayed the fears of many migrants.

A different approach was taken in the Republic of Ireland where Simon Harris TD gave a clear, widely reported declaration at the start of the crisis that all people, document or undocumented, could access health services in Ireland without their details being passed on the Department of Justice and Equality.

It is crucial that all persons in Northern Ireland, including migrants living here without immigration status, feel safe contacting health services to report COVID-19 symptoms and to seek advice. It is not enough to remove charging practices without also making it clear that no person's data will be shared with the Home Office during the crisis. With the statutory basis for data sharing practices in Northern Ireland unclear and healthcare a devolved competence, it is within the power of the NI executive to take action to address this issue.

¹⁵⁵ MoU between HSCIC, Home Office and DH (came into effect January 2017. Subsequently withdrawn): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/774071/MoU_between_HSCIC_Home_Office_and_DH.pdf [Accessed 30.06.20]

¹⁵⁶ Liberty press release, *Legal victory against Government's hostile environment* (November 2018): <https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/legal-victory-against-governments-hostile-environment/> [Accessed 30.06.20]

¹⁵⁷ Overseas chargeable patients, NHS debt and immigration rules (March 2019): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/793132/overseas-chargeable-patients-nhs-debt-and-immigration-rules.pdf [Accessed 30.06.20]

Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provides the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the *highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and includes steps which should be taken by states to achieve this*.¹⁵⁸ The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has clearly stated that this obligation also applies to migrants with or without status.¹⁵⁹ The right to health and wellbeing is also found in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Therefore, removing barriers to access to healthcare is an approach grounded in human rights.

Recommendation:

- Going forwards, as we recover from this pandemic, it is our belief that all NHS Charging and data-sharing with the Home Office should be suspended indefinitely and this must be accompanied by a public information campaign reassuring people that it will be safe for them to access healthcare, regardless of their immigration status.

2.7 Trans Healthcare

The Brackenburn Clinic, which provides gender transition related health care to adult trans people in Northern Ireland, has not accepted any new patients since March 2018, and those on the waiting list (now 460 long) have so far been waiting up to 3 years and 8 months for a first appointment.¹⁶⁰

Gender-affirming healthcare is recognised as essential healthcare by the World Health Organisation and by regulatory bodies in Europe and the UK, and timely access is crucial. Trans communities suffer disproportionately from both mental health problems and from societal stigma and violence, both of which can be helped substantially by access to care. Currently, Northern Ireland has the worst waiting lists and worst future prospects for access to care of any part of the UK and Ireland. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the situation worse.

Waiting lists at the Brackenburn Clinic were and are predominantly due to the excessive psychiatric and psychosocial assessment processes used; the Brackenburn Clinic will never be sustainable with this approach. These psychiatric assessments are not seen at such intensity anywhere else in healthcare, and demonstrate the disproportionate institutional barriers to reproductive care, bodily autonomy and basic human rights placed in the way of trans people of all genders.

¹⁵⁸ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted December 1966): <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx> [Accessed 30.06.20]

¹⁵⁹ CESCR General Comment No. 14 (August 2013): <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4538838do.pdf> [Accessed 30.06.20]

¹⁶⁰ BHSCT FoI Request, June 2020

Individuals who are denied care due to long waiting lists are highly likely to access care in the private sector, at high cost. As trans communities are more likely to experience poverty, this has disproportionate effects on housing security, health and quality of life. Those who are unable to afford private care often self-medicate with hormonal therapies acquired online through unregulated sources or via friends and family. This is particularly difficult for individuals requiring testosterone, which is a controlled substance.

People who are unable to access these options, or those who are but are unable to access other essential care like fertility treatment or surgery, are highly likely to self-medicate with alcohol, smoking or drugs. All self-medication options are usually without any medical or endocrine oversight to ensure safety. Those who are unable to access gender-affirming care in a timely and appropriate manner are disproportionately likely to experience severe mental health problems, self-harm and suicide attempts.

The WPG supports the provision of community-based, sexual-health based models of gender-affirming care in line with global best practice, both to ensure access to care is provided, and to reduce the high costs inherent in the current care pathways. These services must be meaningfully co-produced and co-delivered with organisations working within trans communities and the communities themselves in line with HSCNI policy and human rights treaty law.

Recommendations:

- Specialised gender identity services, following a human rights compliant and culturally competent service model, should be fully commissioned by the Department of Health and be available for trans and questioning people who wish to access them to explore their gender identity. This should not be a centralised service for all trans people and access to these services should not be a prerequisite to accessing gender-transition-related healthcare;
- The reinforcement of gender roles and stereotypes within Gender Identity Services causes detrimental harm to trans and gender non-conforming patients, in particular those who identify outside the gender binary, and should be removed in favour of a model which affirms the gender identity of the patient and supports diverse gender expression;
- New policies, service models or reforms within the health service which will have an impact on trans communities should be developed in consultation with civil society organisations and the trans community at large;
- Any new gender affirming services should be based in the community and on a sexual health model of care;
- A review of access to mainstream healthcare services for trans patients, and adaptation of materials/advertising to recognise and include trans experiences, should be undertaken by the Department of Health.

2.8 Disabled Women

Disabled women and girls 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 the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) effectively within Northern Ireland to ensure that disabled women live in an equal society which is free from economic, social and cultural barriers. Only 7% of disabled people are employed, but those who are face low-paid work and underemployment. In addition, disabled women earn 22.1% less than non-disabled men, 11.8% less than disabled men and 26% of households with a disabled person live in poverty compared to 22% of households overall. Disabled women are set to lose 13% of their annual net income by 2021 due to cumulative tax-benefit changes and austerity. Furthermore, disabled single mothers will have lost 21% of their net income by 2021, and 32% if their child is also disabled.¹⁶¹

Going forward we recommend that the government should:

- Ensure that programmes and policies dealing with the elimination of exploitation, violence and abuse contain specific actions for disabled women.
- Urgently address the issue of disabled women being denied the same access to maternal health services, including sexual and reproductive health, as other women.
- Promote the employment of disabled women 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.
- Urgently address and reform the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) application process, Universal Credit and Welfare Reform, to prevent any further discrimination against disabled women in Northern Ireland.

In the context of COVID-19, the WPG would like to support the below Sisters of Freda recommendations in the context of Northern Ireland¹⁶²:

I. Access to Food:

- It is vital that the NI Assembly and local councils work with supermarkets to recognise that disabled people/women's needs for groceries and shopping are prioritised. For many disabled people needing to shield, the lockdown may go on

¹⁶¹ Women's Budget Group (2018), 'Disabled Women and Austerity', (available online): <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Disabled-women-October-2018-w-cover-2.pdf> [accessed 29.06.20].

¹⁶² Sisters of Frida, (April 2020), 'The Impact of COVID-19 on Disabled Women from Sisters of Frida: Voices of Disabled women in the pandemic', (available online): <http://www.sisofrida.org/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-disabled-women-from-sisters-of-frida/> [accessed 29.06.20].

for much longer than the general public. Despite this, many disabled people are not listed for priority; particularly those women from BAME communities.

- There should be intersectional strategies for future emergencies on the groups that share protected characteristics so that disabled people impacted will not be deprived of food, similar to that of a crisis zone.
- Safeguarding of volunteers should be reviewed to ensure that disabled people are not put at further risk.

II. Access to Health and Medical Services:

- Publish critical care guidance being used by the NHS to decide who to treat and how to apply Do Not Resuscitate Orders, so that disabled people can be reassured to their right to life under Article 2 of the Human Rights Act will be protected, should they become critically ill.
- Ensure support is given to BAME communities for access to medical care and services.
- Ensure supplies of PPE to care home staff, test patients before discharging from hospital to care home.
- Ensure testing is available to staff and people living in care homes with fair access to treatment and that blanket DNRs are not used.
- Ensure personal assistants and family carers are allowed to accompany disabled people with other physical or communication support needs at any time they are in hospital.
- Ensure COVID-19 information is available in accessible formats such as Easy read, Large print, and in BSL and in various languages.
- Ensure all essential public broadcasts and NI Assembly updates are translated into BSL and ISL. Ensure people are aware of the alternative services, volunteer programmes, and how to access them including those not able to access the internet.

III. Voices of Disabled Mothers:

- Ensure that disabled parents are prioritised for social care support. Require local councils to assess those disabled parents facing increased need for support as a result of school closures, limited access to childcare and other effects of lockdown,
- Ensure that disabled parents receive safe postnatal care despite lockdown conditions; particularly in the context of the new NI Mental Health Action Plan.

IV. Access to Support/Paid and Unpaid Care/Independent Living:

- PPE must be made available to all disabled people who have PAs/carers working in their homes, particularly ahead of any potential second wave,
- COVID-19 testing should be readily available to all carers/PAs of disabled people so that disabled people are not at risk of catching the virus from carers who work for multiple clients,
- Comprehensive guidance should be released advising people on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19 while using care/PA services, whether the care is funded by direct payments or provided by volunteers such as family members.

V. General Rights of Disabled Women and COVID-19:

- Ensure all disabled women's rights are upheld and protected throughout the entirety and recovery of COVID-19,
- Require all councils to release information on the specific supports they are delivering to disabled people during the easing of the lockdown.

VI. Disabled Women and Domestic Violence/Abuse:

- Provide guidance and support to frontline violence against women organisations and refuges to the needs of disabled women in danger of domestic abuse; including the communication and access needs of disabled women and reasonable adjustments,
- Create greater flexibility in the provision of care packages, particularly for disabled women trapped in social isolation and in danger from Domestic Abuse,
- Support particular provisions of support for disabled women in both the Domestic Abuse Bill (for example, the Staysafe East amendments) and through specific support in any miscellaneous bill to follow the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill.

3. Social Justice Pillar

3.1 Racial Justice

Black Lives Matter

The WPG stands in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. From Minneapolis to Northern Ireland, the message is the same, we cannot tolerate racism in our society and we all have a duty to work to remove the barriers that uphold systemic racism. It is absolutely essential that we all take action to urgently address the harm systemic racism has caused in our society.

We are deeply concerned about how the PSNI treated the Black Lives Matter protesters in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry on Saturday 6th June 2020. We note that it has been confirmed that a last-minute amendment was made to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020¹⁶³ just hours before the anti-racism protests started, which attached enforcement powers to the regulations and enabled the PSNI to fine those in attendance; despite evidence of safety and social distancing being in place.

We call on all parties to support the urgent cancellation of all fines issued to protesters; particularly as there have been several allegations of black protesters being specifically targeted and fined. We also believe that the last-minute introduction of this legal basis to create penalties is completely unacceptable and largely disproportionate. There is a balance to be drawn between the right to protest and a public health emergency and, given the social distancing measures implemented by protest organisers, the measures taken by the PSNI are deeply concerning.

We need to stress that racism is not a problem confined to the USA or Great Britain, but is an issue that is highly prevalent in Northern Ireland. We need our representatives to take steps to address this. In 2016-17, statistics show that racially motivated hate crime overtook sectarian hate crimes¹⁶⁴ for the first time in the history of Northern Ireland. More recently, the PSNI recorded 936 racist incidents including 626 racist crimes¹⁶⁵ between April 2019 and March 2020. Many people may not have felt able to report to the police and so the real figure is likely much higher. We are calling for the urgent creation and implementation of a Racial Equality Strategy (which

¹⁶³ The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/health-protection-coronavirus-restrictions-northern-ireland-regulations-2020>

¹⁶⁴ Police Service of Northern Ireland Trends in Hate Motivated Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2017/18 Annual Bulletin published 31 October 2018, p.6: <https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/hate-motivation-statistics/documents/hate-motivated-incidents-and-crimes-in-northern-ireland-2004-05-to-2017-18.pdf>

¹⁶⁵ Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland Update to 31 March 2020 published 15 May 2020, p.4: <https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/hate-motivation-statistics/2019-20/q4/hate-motivation-bulletin-mar-20.pdf>

was already committed to within the New Decade, New Approach agreement) and for further measures to be taken in the Programme for Government to tackle the systemic racism that exists in NI.

In Northern Ireland, racism is so deeply embedded in our society that it is even in our built environment. In Newry, there is a statue and a street dedicated to John Mitchel, a supporter of the trade in enslaved people who called for the reopening of the African slave trade in 1957 and described Black people as “innately inferior”. We have a duty to recognise our own privilege and begin to dismantle the pillars that uphold systemic racism; including aspects of our built environment that glorify prominent racists. This is evidence of the endemic nature of racism in NI.

We also support calls for the closure of the Larne House Immigration Detention Centre in the Larne PSNI Station. This centre houses women and men together. There is no women-only recreation space and so many women are forced to self-confine to their rooms due to safety concerns. The poor conditions and inadequate facilities for traumatised people needlessly incarcerated here has been highlighted by HM Inspectorate of Prisons multiple times. It is entirely inappropriate to house an immigration detention centre in a PSNI station as this prevents people with irregular immigration status from coming to the PSNI for help. This is a situation that disproportionately impacts people of colour.

COVID-19 Impact on Racialised Communities and Health and Care Staff

In the context of COVID-19, evidence suggests that the pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on racialised communities and health and care staff. The NHS Confederation BME Leadership Network have outlined the below concerns to ensure senior health leaders and policy makers can make informed decision-making to address this¹⁶⁶:

- Early analysis points to an overrepresentation of BME health and care professionals among COVID-19 fatalities.
- Some BME groups are at higher risk of certain diseases and conditions and a number of BME staff from various socio-economic backgrounds, including hospital consultants, nurses, healthcare assistants and cleaners have died from the virus.
- Better and more transparent collection and reporting of ethnicity data is needed to understand the full impact of COVID-19.

¹⁶⁶ NHS Confederation BME Leadership Network Member Briefing April 2020:
<https://www.nhsconfed.org/resources/2020/04/the-impact-of-covid19-on-bme-communities-and-staff>

Research from the WBG, LSE, Queen Mary University of London and the Fawcett Society has also produced significant evidence on racialised women and the impact of COVID-19¹⁶⁷:

Poverty and Debt

- Women of colour are more worried about debt as a result of the pandemic - 49.9% compared to 37.1% of white women and 34.2% of white men. 42.9% of women of colour also said they would struggle to make ends meet over the next three months. A quarter of BAME mothers reported that they are struggling to feed their children (23.7%).

Work and Employment

- Work-related anxiety for those working outside the home was highest among people of colour, with 65.1% of women and 73.8% of men reporting anxiety.
- Of those working from home, a higher proportion of people of colour (41.0% of women and 39.8% of men) reported working more than they did before the pandemic compared to white people (29.2% of women and 28.5% of men).

Domestic Care and Work

- Nearly half of women of colour (45.4%) said they were struggling to cope with all the different demands on their time at the moment (work, home schooling, unpaid care, domestic labour) compared to 34.6% of white women and 29.6% of white men.
- Around ¾ of all women reported doing the majority of housework and childcare during the lockdown.
- For all questions regarding struggling to balance paid work and unpaid care, women of colour were the most likely to report struggling and white men were the least likely.

Access to Support

- Twice as many women and men of colour reported that they had recently lost support from the government (42.5% and 48.3%) than white women and men (12.7% and 20.6%).
- People of colour were also more likely to have lost support from other people (48.3% compared to 34.0%) and were less likely to say there were people outside of their household who they could rely on for help (47.4% compared to 57.2%).
- Over half of women of colour said that they were not sure where to turn for help as a result of the pandemic compared to 18.7% of white respondents.

Recommendations:

- We call on all parties to support the urgent cancellation of all fines issued to protesters; particularly as there have been several allegations of black protesters being specifically targeted and fined.

¹⁶⁷ WBG et. al. (2020), 'BAME women and COVID-19 - Research Evidence', (available online):

- Immediately close the Larne Detention Centre.
- Develop a Racial Equality Strategy and incorporate accountability mechanisms into the Programme for Government to address systemic racism.
- Better and more transparent collection and reporting of ethnicity data is needed to understand the full impact of COVID-19; including reports from employers of redundancies with breakdowns of protected characteristics.
- As recommended elsewhere in this plan, immediately increase child benefit to £50 per child per week; scrap the two-child cap which can disproportionately impact BAME families across the UK; make UC advanced payments grants instead of loans.
- Scrap No Recourse to Public Funds.
- Ban exploitative zero-hour contracts and increase the real living wage to improve the working conditions of people of colour, particularly women, who are over-represented in low-paid precarious work.
- Complete and publish meaningful and comprehensive equality impact assessments of all COVID-19 policy decisions informed by intersectional data.
- Support families' access to educational resources and equipment at home to minimise the increased racial attainment gaps - including the provision of IT equipment and additional support for parents.
- Introduce quotas and shortlists to increase the levels of representation of people of colour, especially women, in public life in Northern Ireland given the non-existent representation at present.

3.2 Politics, Public Life, Peacebuilding and Decision Making

Women, peace and security issues in light of COVID-19

As the impact of COVID-19 is deeply gendered, a rights-based approach and gender post-conflict analysis of the Northern Irish context must therefore be at the centre of the COVID-19 response and recovery process. The Women, Peace and Security Agenda provides an essential framework for analysing and responding to COVID-19, however dispute over the legal status of the conflict in Northern Ireland continues to preclude application of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security to the region.

In 2008, 2013 and 2019 the CEDAW Committee called for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in NI, as has the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women¹⁶⁸. A consultation on legacy issues¹⁶⁹ (2018) acknowledged that a '*disproportionate number of survivors and family members are women*'. The CEDAW Concluding Observations 2019 call for effective participation of women in post conflict reconstruction, and addressing obstacles including paramilitary intimidation¹⁷⁰. It can be noted that 2020 marks the 20th

¹⁶⁸ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), articles 1 and 2. The UK signed the Convention in 1981 and ratified in 1986

¹⁶⁹ Concluding Observations 2019, 2013, 2008 on examinations of the UK under CEDAW

¹⁷⁰ Council of Europe (2007) Gender equality standards and mechanisms:

anniversary of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and activities and actions globally are planned to mark the Resolution, which was the first to highlight women's central role in peacebuilding and post-conflict decision-making.

Despite this, there has been little progress on increasing women's participation in securing peace or in post conflict reconstruction. The 2014 Stormont House Agreement (SHA), the latest agreement outlining structures to deal with the past in Northern Ireland, contained no specific mechanisms for increasing the involvement of women. Extensive consultation with women¹⁷¹ found that many feel disempowered, have difficulty circumnavigating community gate-keepers (including paramilitary groups) and fear harm if they were to speak out.

The COVID-19 crisis with its particular impacts on women's income, socioeconomic independence and increased caring responsibilities is likely to compound barriers to women's involvement in peacebuilding and decision-making processes. Focused action is even more important than previously to enable women's active inclusion. As the Women, Peace and Security agenda provides an essential framework for analysing and responding to COVID-19, the structures, policies and guidance contained in the agenda should be applied to the COVID-19 response in Northern Ireland.

Good Friday Agreement

The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement committed to increasing women's representation in public and political life, yet women remain under-represented in all spheres of political life, at Westminster, in the Stormont Assembly and in local government, as well as in public life and economic decision making. The three year collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive will likely impact the 2021 target date for reaching gender equality in public appointments. Multiple reports, including annual reports of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland; the report on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly by the Assembly Executive Review Committee (2015); the Inquiry by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on UNSCR 1325 Women, Peace and Security (2014); and repeated CEDAW Committee Concluding Observations (most recently March 2019), have concluded that women's under-representation in political and public life and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland is a serious matter to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

New Decade, New Approach

In the context of COVID-19 recovery planning, it is imperative that women are included in decision making across all departments in Northern Ireland. Already, we have seen recovery planning take place with little to no consultation with the women's sector, who have been consistently producing evidence of the disproportionate impact COVID-19 is having on women. Voluntary and community sector groups have been set up without women's organisations being

Recommendation CM/Rec (2007) 17 of the Committee of Ministers and Explanatory Memorandum, p. 22.

¹⁷¹ Council of Europe Convention on the prevention and combating violence against women and girls.

initially invited. Additionally, the Department for Economy's Economic Advisory Group was established without the inclusion of any civil society organisations, trade unions, or the women's sector. We have also seen significant delays to all commitments set out in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. COVID-19 is exacerbating existing inequalities, and women's equality cannot be deprioritised due to COVID-19 response planning. Rather, gender equality should be embedded within all governmental decision-making relating to COVID-19, health, the economy, infrastructure, budgets, the Programme for Government and more.

Commitments to introduce the below strategies cannot be delayed any further, as civil society and women more generally have been calling for the implementation of many of these strategies for more than a decade:

- Anti-poverty strategy;
- Economic/Industrial strategy;
- Investment Strategy;
- Energy Strategy;
- Racial Equality Strategy;
- Disability Strategy;
- Gender Strategy;
- Sexual Orientation/LGBT+ Strategy;
- Active Aging Strategy;
- Children and Young People's Strategy;
- Childcare Strategy;
- Strategy to address impacts of climate change.

Women's participation is key in the creation of all of the above strategies, which are set to be the basis of the Programme for Government. Our recommendations throughout this plan should too be considered, when identifying the impact of COVID-19 on all of the above groups. Worryingly, the New Decade, New Approach agreement did not mention women at all, and already we have seen the impact of women's participation being absent from emergency response planning; as evidenced in the Executive roadmap to recovery which neglected to mention childcare.

Future mechanisms for dealing with the legacy of the past in NI must actively encourage the participation of women, regardless of what exact form they take. Broader adoption of the 'Gender Principles for Dealing with the Legacy of the Past'¹⁷², which were developed in 2015 by a multi-disciplinary group of human rights experts and academics, could assist in achieving this.

Recommendations:

We call upon elected representatives to:

¹⁷² Catherine O'Rourke (2015), 'Gender Principles for Dealing with the Legacy of the Past', *Transitional Justice Institute*, (available online): https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/66285/Gender-Principle-Report-Sept-2015_Final-Version.pdf [accessed 29.06.20].

- Ensure women's groups are adequately represented in all departmental COVID-19 recovery planning procedures.
- Recognise and act concretely on implementation of specific measures to realise the full spirit and intention of UNSCR 1325 and CEDAW Recommendation No.30 to ensure women's effective participation and leadership in conflict prevention, post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding processes in Northern Ireland.
- Guarantee women's participation in transitional justice mechanisms envisaged in the draft Northern Ireland (Stormont House Agreement) Bill. Implement special temporary measures to advance women's substantive equality.
- Ensure the women's sector is consulted with and included in the co-design of all departmental strategies and the Programme for Government.
- Utilise Section 43A of the Sex Discrimination (NI) Order 1976 to improve the proportion of women elected to parliamentary institutions through gender quotas. Accelerate action to reach gender equal representation in public bodies.
- Address obstacles to participation including: intimidation and violence by paramilitary groups. As noted by the 2014 inquiry by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women, Peace and Security, these can include;
 - o Online abuse of women political and public representatives;
 - o Intersectionalities which compound barriers to participation e.g. specific issues impacting BME women, disabled women, rural women, LGBT+ women, younger women, lone parents and those with childcare responsibilities;
 - o The rule obliging political candidates to publish their home addresses for elections which threatens the personal safety of Domestic and Sexual Abuse survivors.

3.3 Restorative Justice

In the Independent Hate Crime Legislation Review led by Judge Desmond Marrinan, restorative justice is described as a mechanism that “gives victims the chance to meet, or communicate with, the relevant people who have harmed, to explain the impact the crime has had on their lives. This has the potential to help some victims by giving them a voice within a safe and supportive setting and giving them a sense of closure¹⁷³”. We believe restorative justice does have a place within the criminal justice process in dealing with hate crime in Northern Ireland. This is particularly important as it has been argued that the needs of hate crime victims are not always addressed through the conventional punitive approach and many victims may benefit further from restorative justice. Further, research illustrates restorative justice mechanisms reducing levels of anger, anxiety and fear and that they can prevent further incidents from recurring or escalating¹⁷⁴. It is also clear that punitive responses such as prison sentences can have limited deterrent value and can act as breeding groups for intolerance and hate. To reduce hate crimes in NI, a range of

¹⁷³ Independent Hate Crime Legislation Review Northern Ireland, (Feb 2020), para 15.2: <https://www.hatecrimereviewni.org.uk/sites/hcr/files/media-files/Consultation%20Paper%20Feb%202020.pdf> [accessed 29.06.20].

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, para 15.4.

approaches are likely to be needed, but there should be a focus on phasing out punitive measures in favour of processes more likely to reduce violence against already marginalised communities, through restorative justice, increased education etc.

However, any restorative justice process that is created needs to be led by victims entirely. Victims must not be put into a position where they can be pressurised by the offender, for example through the virtue of their relationship, to opt for restorative justice measures as an alternative to seeking punitive justice. Any form of restorative justice needs to work alongside the judicial system and be made up of adequately trained professionals. Further, restorative justice should only be an option in cases of “low-level” crimes. In order to test the effectiveness on reducing recurring incidents and increasing awareness, the changing attitudes or views of the perpetrator needs to be evaluated and tested.

In relation to domestic violence and sexual abuse, however, it is regrettable that we have a system that does not prioritise true rehabilitation, but alternatives within the current system are not feasible. In the case of the often suggested approach of restorative justice, there are serious concerns as it applies to the crime of domestic abuse. Restorative justice, even if victim-led, is not appropriate if there are power disparities between participants, and in the case of a victim and abuser, power resides with the abuser by the nature of the offence. It is widely accepted that psychological abuse is routine in these cases and it damages a victim’s self-esteem to such a degree that they regularly need several abortive attempts to leave before they have the necessary resources to do so. In light of this knowledge, it is important that we remember that restorative practices may be initiated by a victim who simply wants the legal trouble to “go away” and the relationship to resume. Further, power-dynamics must be acknowledged and many victims may feel pressured to undergo restorative justice practices by their abusers. The WPG is mindful also that survivors should not be belittled and it remains necessary for a very robust system of safeguards to be in place to ensure that this cannot be the case¹⁷⁵.

The prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement in political discussions this year has led to increased awareness of and movement towards many of their political asks, particularly, the defunding of police and rethinking of how we can ensure justice while prioritizing care for our communities. Resourcing and centring restorative justice is an important step in that process, yes, but it is not the only step. The demilitarisation and defunding of the police service would free up funds to go directly to communities, reducing poverty and hence reducing crime. It would also allow for a more fit-for-purpose system for dealing with cases requiring genuine community care where armed officers may not be as helpful as, for instance, mental health crisis teams with extensive training on deescalation and suicide prevention, or a for-purpose domestic violence response team based in social care.

Rethinking what justice means and moving away from a punitive and carceral criminal justice system is imperative to reducing harm in our communities and building a Northern Ireland on

¹⁷⁵ For more information, see: Liebmann, M. and Wootton, L. (2010), ‘Restorative Justice and Domestic Violence/Abuse’, HMP Cardiff, (available online) - <https://restorativejustice.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/files/Restorative%20Justice%20and%20Domestic%20Violence%20and%20Abuse.pdf> [accessed 29.06.20].

foundations of care over violence. We welcome the current consultation process from the Department of Justice on Restorative Justice, but recognise that a consultation does not ensure action. The Department of Justice should commence work into the demilitarisation of the Police Service, and move to prioritising care in our communities. The WPG will provide further recommendations on restorative justice in this consultation process.

3.4 Digital Divide and Access Poverty

Access to digital technologies is still limited in Northern Ireland, primarily due to uneven broadband access and coverage, especially in rural areas. Many women, in particular older women, also report lack of skills and confidence in using technology.

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP) hosted a conference on CEDAW in January 2020, featuring CEDAW Committee vice chair Nicole Ameline as keynote speaker. In her keynote, Mme Ameline highlighted the gender aspects of the digital divide and emphasised that women and girls need to be fully engaged in the development of technology, including artificial intelligence. Mme Ameline emphasised the risks of artificial intelligence, as current evidence indicates algorithms are male oriented and often produce discriminatory results for women in all spheres of life, from assessing eligibility for loans or credit cards to accessing social protection. This is also true when it comes to the use of facial recognition technologies (where it is allowed) as women are more likely to be misidentified.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the gender aspects of the digital divide, with reports of mothers struggling to support their children's education on mobile phones, and teenagers scrambling to complete schoolwork on mobiles or a single family laptop. Older women are among the groups least likely to be digitally connected and computer literate, although efforts were made to address this particularly during the pandemic. Newcomer, asylum seeking and refugee families also face challenges in accessing affordable internet services, which are critical for them to maintain contact with their extended families and through this, support their health and wellbeing¹⁷⁶.

It is also important to note that digital literacy and poverty among vulnerable sections of our community is likely to be a barrier to the effectiveness of contact tracing apps. This includes, though is not exclusive to, the elderly and those with irregular immigration status. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the potential of technology in connecting people and also in providing support services.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen access to high quality broadband services across Northern Ireland.

¹⁷⁶ See the PPR campaign 'Internet Access for All': <https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/internet-access-for-all>

- Work with telecommunications providers to ensure access to affordable broadband services.
- Work with the women's sector to ensure women have the appropriate skills to benefit from digital services and communications technologies.
- Ensure women, including women end users, are engaged in development of digital technologies and services, including artificial intelligence and assistive technologies.

3.5 No Recourse to Public Funds/Immigration

The barriers in accessing social security for the migrant community have been painfully highlighted during the economic uncertainty of the coronavirus crisis.

Section 3(1)(c)(ii) of the Immigration Act 1971 provides that limited leave to enter or remain in the United Kingdom may be subject to a condition requiring that person maintain themselves, and any dependants, without recourse to public funds. This is known as 'No Recourse to Public Funds' or NRPF. Since 2012, a 'NRPF condition' has been imposed on nearly all migrants granted the right to live or work in the UK. The Home Office justifies this condition on the basis that people seeking to establish their family life in the UK must do so on a basis that "prevents burdens on the taxpayer and promotes integration".¹⁷⁷ This covers a huge number of visas including those for spouses, parents and adult dependants. The effect of this condition is that the person holding leave is permitted to work in the UK and pays taxes but is prohibited from accessing the safety net of public funds paid for by those very taxes. Other migrants such as those without status, or those subject to a sponsor maintenance undertaking, can also be prevented from accessing welfare benefits. Collectively these are known as NRPF groups. Breaching a NRPF condition can result in a criminal conviction and can negatively impact future immigration status.

Paragraph 6 of the Immigration Rules lists the benefits considered as 'public funds' for the purpose of the Immigration Rules.¹⁷⁸ This definition covers most benefits which are paid for by the state such as child benefit, housing benefit or universal credit. It does not include benefits that are based on National Insurance contributions, such as statutory sick pay or statutory maternity pay.

The imposition of NRPF by the Home Office is discretionary, but in practice this discretion is rarely exercised. Generally discretion will only be exercised where the applicant is destitute or there are particularly compelling reasons relating to the welfare of a child or they provide proof of other exceptional circumstances relating to their finances. Some people who have a NRPF

¹⁷⁷ Family Policy, Family life (as a partner or parent), private life and exceptional circumstances. 2nd June 2020: https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/889361/family-life-as-a-partner-or-parent-private-life-and-exceptional-circumstances-v8.0-gov-uk.pdf (accessed 30th June 2020)

¹⁷⁸ UK Immigration Rules 25th February 2016: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-introduction> (accessed 30th June 2020)

condition on their visa can apply to have it lifted, but they must show they have become destitute, or particularly compelling reasons relating to the welfare of a child, or exceptional circumstances relating to their finances. This option is also limited to persons on certain visa routes such as family and private life. Applying to have NRPF lifted can also result in your visa renewal period being changed to a ten year route; effectively doubling the time it will take for the person to gain indefinite leave to remain in the UK.¹⁷⁹

Local authority and social services departments have some limited statutory duties to provide support to people who are subject to NRPF. For example in Northern Ireland social services commonly are required to step in and protect the welfare of children who have become destitute due to NRPF under Article 18 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.¹⁸⁰ However, some NRPF groups are excluded from local authority support, unless it is necessary to prevent a breach of their human rights. In practice it can be very difficult to obtain support from social services.

NRPF stands out as a particularly draconian element of the Hostile Environment because it impacts such a broad range of migrants. A report by the Migration Observatory found that around 1.376 million people hold valid UK visas that would usually be subject to the NRPF condition.¹⁸¹ People who have been living, working and contributing to taxes in the UK for years are subject to this measure. The policy also disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups such as single parent households, pregnant women and people subject to domestic violence, leaving them without the safety net of social welfare and throwing families into destitution.¹⁸² This was exacerbated during the coronavirus crisis as job losses and economic uncertainty left people subject to NRPF unable to access support, leaving them forced to work in unsafe conditions, trapped in unsafe housing, and unable to self-isolate and support their families. An example is in Northern Ireland the Discretionary Support (Amendment) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 created a Discretionary Support Grant designed to urgently support those affected by the Coronavirus crisis.¹⁸³ However, these grants are listed as a public fund in Paragraph 6 of the Immigration rules, excluding persons subject to NRPF from accessing them.

A recent High Court challenge to the NRPF policy has led to a slight softening of the rules. In *R (W, A Child By His Litigation Friend J) v Secretary of State for the Home Department & Anor*, the court found the Home Office's policy of imposing NRPF under paragraph GEN.1.11A of

¹⁷⁹ Application for change of conditions of leave to allow access to public funds if your circumstances change 3rd March 2014: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/application-for-change-of-conditions-of-leave-to-allow-access-to-public-funds-if-your-circumstances-change> (accessed 30th June 2020)

¹⁸⁰ The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995; www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1995/755/article/18/made (accessed 30th June 2020)

¹⁸¹ Between a rock and a hard place: the Covid-19 crisis and migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) 26th June 2020; <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-the-covid-19-crisis-and-migrants-with-no-recourse-to-public-funds-nrpf/> (accessed 30th June 2020)

¹⁸² Migrant Women, No Recourse to Public Funds and the Pandemic 1st June 2020; https://maternityaction.org.uk/2020/06/migrant-women-no-recourse-to-public-funds-and-the-pandemic/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=migrant-women-no-recourse-to-public-funds-and-the-pandemic (accessed 30th June 2020)

¹⁸³ The Discretionary Support (Amendment) (Covid-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 24th March 2020; <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2020/44/introduction/made> (accessed 30th June 2020)

Appendix FM to be unlawful and a breach of Article 3 ECHR.¹⁸⁴ This decision only addresses the fact that Home Office guidance does not provide for those who are not yet suffering inhuman and degrading treatment, but are about to. This ruling did not abolish NRPF but required the Home Office to publish a revised policy instruction. The Home Office amended its guidance to state that: “In all cases where an applicant has been granted leave, or is seeking leave, under the family or private life routes the NRPF condition must be lifted or not imposed if an applicant is destitute or is at risk of imminent destitution without recourse to public funds.”¹⁸⁵

There is a vocal movement from Westminster and external stakeholders calling for the suspension or complete lifting of NRPF in light of the coronavirus crisis.¹⁸⁶ Boris Johnson has even appeared to call for a review into the policy on the 27th May 2020 when he stated before the Liaison Committee “people who’ve worked hard for this country who live and work here should have support of one kind or another”.¹⁸⁷ However, a review is not enough, the human rights and equality impact of NRPF is shockingly clear and the stated policy goal of preventing migrants becoming a burden to the taxpayer is not proportionate to the detrimental impacts caused.

Recommendations:

- The NRPF policy must be suspended in light of the coronavirus pandemic and the economic downturn faced as we move out of lockdown.
- Long term, the policy must be abolished in order to ensure that those who have worked and contributed taxes and the most vulnerable in our society can access the support they need to live in safety and dignity.

¹⁸⁴ *R (W, A Child By His Litigation Friend J) v Secretary of State for the Home Department & Anor* 21st May 2020 <https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2020/1299.html> (accessed 30th June 2020)

¹⁸⁵ Family life (as a partner or parent), private life and exceptional circumstances 2nd June 2020; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/889361/family-life-as-a-partner-or-parent-private-life-and-exceptional-circumstances-v8.0-gov-uk.pdf (accessed 30th June 2020)

¹⁸⁶ Scrap UK rule that has left 1m migrant workers at risk of destitution, say MPs 22nd June 2020; <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/22/scrap-no-recourse-to-public-funds-rules-left-1m-migrants-on-edge-of-destitution-say-mps> (accessed 30th June 2020)

¹⁸⁷ If Boris Johnson is baffled by Britain's cruel migration laws he should change them 29th May 2020; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/29/boris-johnson-baffled-britain-migration-laws> (accessed 30th June 2020)

4. Cultural Pillar

4.1 Women and Girls in the Media, Rape Culture and Violence Against Women

Sexism and the sexist portrayal of women and girls in the media remains a serious issue.

Most visibly focused on women in public life, it impacts not just those women, but women and girls who are exposed to it. Research by Girlguiding UK shows that the single biggest reason listed by girls aged 11-16 that they are put off entering public life is because “women leaders are criticised more than male leaders”, with the third largest percentage saying that “there is too much focus on how they look and not on what they do”¹⁸⁸. This demonstrates clearly the impact that this kind of media coverage has; while the women directly named may have developed a “thick skin”, the young women looking on will often exclude themselves for careers they would otherwise choose because of this scrutiny.

The same research from Girlguiding UK reports that young women are negatively influenced by advertising, in both traditional media and social media, that promotes certain beauty standards and encourages the use of cosmetic surgery, extremely restrictive dieting and similar methods including medically unsafe detox and diet products. With eating disorders on the rise¹⁸⁹ and the damage that they can do known to medical professionals, this is something that needs to be strictly regulated for a number of different reasons.

Further, media can be especially critical when considering the intersectional identities that people have, with trans women and women of colour particularly impacted by intense media scrutiny. In recent years trans people - women and children in particular - have been the subject of a kind of “moral panic”, particularly in the UK media. Some of the media rhetoric has focused on the supposed danger that these people pose to women and girls.

In addition to this, there are serious issues with the way the media report on sexual offences and on domestic abuse, violence and homicide. Many headlines, in particular, mislead the reader and can reinforce myths around sexual and intimate partner violence. There have been some successful strides made in persuading media outlets to accept that guidelines are needed in the reporting of domestic abuse and especially domestic homicide. Level Up campaigned to have guidelines accepted to prevent further trauma to victims and their families and to avoid sending the wrong message about the nature of intimate partner violence. While they were successful,

¹⁸⁸ Girlguiding, (2019), ‘Girls attitudes survey’, (available online):

<https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2019.pdf>

¹⁸⁹ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/feb/15/hospital-admissions-for-eating-disorders-surge-to-highest-in-eight-years>

there are still numerous instances of this occurring in the media and guidelines therefore need to be enforced more stringently.

Their suggested guidelines on reporting domestic homicide¹⁹⁰ were as follows:

1. Accountability: Place responsibility solely on the killer, which means avoiding speculative “reasons” or “triggers”, or describing the murder as an uncharacteristic event. Homicides are usually underpinned by a longstanding sense of ownership, coercive control and possessive behaviours: they are not a random event.
2. Accuracy: Name the crime as domestic violence, instead of “tragedy” or “horror”, and include the National Domestic Violence Helpline at the end of the piece.
3. Dignity: Avoid sensationalising language, invasive or graphic details that compromise the dignity of the dead woman or her surviving family members.
4. Equality: Avoid insensitive or trivialising language or images
5. Images: Avoid using stock images that reinforce the myth that it’s only a physical crime.

Rape Myths and Rape Culture

As of mid June 2020, none of the recommendations contained in the Gillen Review that require legislation have been brought into place, and there are no published plans as yet to do so. Many of the changes recommended would be transformative for the experience of reporting rape or other serious sexual offences, and since the Gillen review was commissioned by the state there is an imperative to act upon its recommendations as soon as possible. **We urge action on this as soon as possible, and at least a timetable of the plans moving forward.**

One specific recommendation of the Gillen Review was a public awareness campaign, funded by the state, to tackle rape myths and to counter misinformation and confusion on the issue of consent. As more and more people come forward with complaints of sexual misconduct, it is apparent that we need this as urgently as ever. Public awareness can also begin in formal educational institutions, specifically schools and third level organisations, and such a programme must deal with issues around consent and boundaries, in an age appropriate manner, without fudging the issue. Sex and relationships education is, at present, dependent on individual schools who can choose who to invite to cover the topic and can do so in a way that does not deal with these issues head on. In addition they are sometimes entirely heteronormative, not covering LGBTQ+ relationships at all, and therefore not providing the necessary skills to an especially vulnerable demographic.

¹⁹⁰ <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/women/domestic-abuse-reporting-guidelines-ipso-press-regulation-a8871996.html>

With regards to rape myths, Raise Your Voice has submitted evidence to IPSO on guidelines for the reporting of sexual violence. In it, they argue that there are many myths about rape and there will be more as society and technology evolve. Recently in the UK a Judge was widely criticised for espousing, from the bench, the view that a husband cannot rape his wife, despite the law on marital rape changing in 1991, and the person in question being trained on the law.

The real danger of rape myths is their persistence. The above case shows how pernicious they can be, and research also shows that these myths pass down through generations, with college-aged men likely to espouse them when their father does, too¹⁹¹. A recent YouGov survey in the UK showed a similar trend among Britons, with a quarter of those 4,000 surveyed believing that marital rape does not exist¹⁹² and many more expressing confusion regarding whether rape can occur where there is no violence.

In the Gillen Review, commissioned to research and publish recommendations for the conduct of trials into serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland. The resulting Report contains over 200 recommendations that are wide-ranging and overwhelmingly welcomed by the women's movement in Northern Ireland. One of his key recommendations is Recommendation Number 18: "That the press and media should be party to a voluntary protocol governing how serious sexual offences are reported." This is especially true when reporting on rape myths¹⁹³. Gillen writes:

"Rape myths are a trial reality and can often form the basis of aggressive cross-examination and may attract the unreasonable thinking of jurors. Moreover, for all kinds of societal reasons, complainants often buy into these myths, blaming themselves. I regard them as potentially a major challenge to the concept of a fair trial."

If these myths are a barrier to a trial, when the jurors are in receipt of careful legal instruction, they are certainly a barrier to tackling sexual violence in society as a whole.

Raise Your Voice made the following recommendations which the WPG endorse:

- Guidance must require reports to specify who they are quoting when quotations are used, particularly when they are quoting defence teams' characterisation of a complainant or complainant's behaviour.

¹⁹¹

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jessica_Turchik/publication/226563223_Rape_Myths_History_Individual_and_Institutional-Level_Presence_and_Implications_for_Change/links/0912f513cecb164264000000/Rape-Myths-History-Individual-and-Institutional-Level-Presence-and-Implications-for-Change.pdf

¹⁹² <https://www.theweek.co.uk/98330/when-did-marital-rape-become-a-crime>

¹⁹³ <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/gillen-review-report-law-and-procedures-serious-sexual-offences-ni>

- Guidance should encourage fact-based headlines, because merely using quotation marks around words does not necessarily convey to the reader that this is a person's opinion or a defence's argument.
- Guidance that encourages the centring of victims, particularly after a guilty verdict, as opposed to centring the wasted potential or the tribulations of the convicted sex offender.
- Guidelines requiring the clear identification of rape myths as rape myths, for example when a defence lawyer says "why didn't she shout or fight", a responsible publication will follow that reporting with the proviso that in fact that most rape victims do not shout or fight.
- The detailed reporting of the very few cases where somebody has been falsely accused of rape or sexual assault should always be balanced by accounting for how rare these cases actually are. Failure to do so fuels a dangerous and common myth that these kinds of false accusations are common.
- Endeavour to make clear the difference between a failure to prosecute or a failure to convict and a proven false accusation.
- In the case of online content, publications should actively and adequately monitor comments or close comment sections entirely. Publications have a responsibility with regards to the spreading of misinformation and the potential damage to the public as well as to the complainant in any given case.
- When reporting on sexual crimes and especially serious sexual crimes, helplines and helpful websites for victims and survivors should be included at the end of the piece.

Further WPG recommendations to tackle rape culture include:

- Beginning a public awareness campaign as soon as possible and ensuring that funds are identified and ring fenced in order to make sure that this happens without delay.
- In the interim a timetable for implementing the Gillen Review recommendations must be published.
- We also recommend that a comprehensive, inclusive programme is developed on sex and relationships education, for all schools and 3rd level institutions.
- Ensure all awareness raising programmes in schools are in line with CEDAW General Recommendation 35, with a focus on informing and educating individuals on consent, sexual harassment and victim blaming to dismantle the belief that women and girls are responsible for their own safety.
- Ensure that effective measures are taken within the justice system to address high attrition and low conviction rates.
- Ensure that Violence Against Women and Girls is being reported in a responsible manner across media platforms so as to discourage victim blaming and rape myths as laid out in article 17 of the Istanbul Convention.
- Address issues with reporting gender based violence and threats to eradicate practices of victim-blaming, perpetuating myths and suggestions that women's behaviour should change. Have gender based violence, threats and abuse included as a protected characteristic in any upcoming Hate Crime Legislation Review in Northern Ireland.

Violence Against Women

The Women's Policy Group recently submitted evidence to the Justice Committee relating to the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. The WPG NI welcomes the proposed legislative changes regarding domestic abuse and violence both within the Northern Ireland Assembly and in Westminster Parliament. Activists, women's organisations and support providers have spent many years calling for adequate domestic abuse legislation in Northern Ireland. In the current global pandemic, domestic abuse and violence has sharply increased as many are put at greater risk due to the ongoing government-issued social distancing and lockdown measures. Creating adequate domestic abuse and violence legislation could not be more pertinent than it is right now. Whilst the quick action to introduce Northern Ireland-specific legislation is to be welcomed, this legislation is now over three years old and it is essential that we learn from the lessons in other jurisdictions and ensure that the women's sector are included in the application and implementation of relevant legislation moving forward.

Our full evidence submission, with detailed recommendations relating to the content of the bill, and most significantly, what is missing, can be read [here](#). A summary includes:

Recommendations:

- Remove the 'reasonable defence' clause 12
- Introduction of Stalking legislation
- Introduction of non-fatal and fatal strangulation legislation
- Recognition of Violence against Women and Girls and gender-based violence in line with the Istanbul Convention
- Grant of Secure tenancies in cases of domestic violence and abuse with recognition of the differing needs of disabled women, traveller women, trans communities, rural women, migrant women etc.
- Review of the court systems in NI including criminal, civil and family courts
- Introduce a Domestic Abuse Commissioner for Northern Ireland (already in post for England and Wales)
- Secure funding for specialised services and a review of tendering and procurement in relation to domestic violence and abuse services
- Provide guidelines to employers on recognising the signs of abusive behaviour
- Fully funded programme to raise public awareness of domestic abuse
- Tackle heteronormative assumptions and increase awareness of domestic violence within the context of LGBT+ people
- Recognition of disproportionate impact on rural women, areas of paramilitary control, migrant women, LGBT+ groups, disabled women etc.,
- Powers to deal with domestic abuse:
 - Introduction of domestic abuse protection order
 - Introduction of domestic abuse protection notices

- Safer family court and child contact system
- Improve child safety through:
 - Prohibiting unsupervised child contact for a parent on bail for domestic violence and abuse, or where there are ongoing criminal proceedings.
 - Child contact in cases of domestic abuse is based on an informed judgement on what is in the best interests of children, not the presumption of parental involvement.
 - An independent statutory review of family courts in NI to assess how they deal with domestic abuse cases to work towards consistent outcomes across NI.
- More rigorous and innovative evidence collection approaches to support successful prosecutions including:
 - Use of the Domestic Violence register showing the number of times police have been called to the house, to build a picture of the frequency and nature of abuse (in line with CEDAW Recommendation 35 on gender-based violence),
 - Use of PSNI intelligence and evidence gathered from incidents to build a picture of coercive control as a course of conduct,
 - Use of body worn camera evidence from the scene on each occasion to effectively demonstrate the impact and seriousness of abuse. In parts of England where body worn cameras have been rolled out, there is a marked increase in the severity of sentences for domestic violence related crimes.
- NI has not fully implemented an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor service nine years after it's recommendation; any service should be specialised and not gender-neutral and consideration should be given to the introduction of children's IDVAs and making IDVAs mandatory in police stations
- Ensure there is effective reporting and monitoring of all section 75 groups by the PSNI to ensure the diverse needs of victims from various minority groups can be met
- Addressing re-offending – highlighting the lack of a framework of prevention, rehabilitation and restorative justice in NI
- Guidelines for sentencing for coercive control
- Guidelines for measuring non-physical harm
- Ensure victims' statements cannot be weaponised by prosecutors
- Provide guarantees that women with uncertain immigration status can seek justice without their cases being reported to the Home Office
- Create an inter-departmental approach for the implementation and creation of other legislation with the collaboration of the third sector

4.2 Hate Crimes and Online Abuse

Hate Crimes

With an ongoing Hate Crime Legislation Review happening in Northern Ireland, it is vital that elected representatives take rapid action to create updated legislation to address the growing crisis of increased hate crimes and online abuse towards minority groups. Tackling hate crime should be an immediate priority for the Executive moving forward out of COVID-19. The Women's Policy Group submitted a detailed Hate Crime Legislation Review consultation response which you can read [here](#).

In particular, we are calling for misogyny and transphobia to be added as hate crime characteristics; legislation that accounts for intersecting identities; for consideration to be given to the recognition of sex workers as protected characteristic through consultation with sex workers groups; for recognition of the harm caused by online abuse towards women; a full review of outdated and absent legislation in Northern Ireland relating to hate crime and more mass investment into training and education throughout the judicial system and society as a whole.

A summary of our recommendations include:

- Introduce of an adequate working definition of hate crime,
- Create a consolidated hate crime legislation model for Northern Ireland,
- Replacing the enhanced sentencing model with the statutory aggravation model,
- Apply the statutory aggravation model to all protected characteristics,
- Introduce specific guidelines and extensive programmes of training and education on any new model of hate crime legislation; including what the protected characteristics are and the consequences of committing a hate crime,
- Recognising gender as a protected characteristic through specifically treating misogyny as a standalone hate crime,
- Recognise transgender identity a protected characteristic,
- Recognise intersex identity as a protected characteristic,
- Consider recognising sex workers as a protected characteristic,
- Create a legal framework that recognises the importance of intersectionality to adequately reflect the experiences and identities of victims and motivations of perpetrators,
- Require the court to state if offences are aggravated, reflect this on court records and outline the difference the aggravation had on sentencing,
- Record aggravated offences on criminal justice records,
- Introduce a “by reason of” threshold,
- Create a statutory legal definition of “hostility”,

- Add equivalent provisions to Sections 4, 4A and 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 to the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987,
- Remove “dwelling” defences,
- Include all protected groups under the stirring up provisions of the Public Order (NI) Order 1987,
- Recognise the severe harm caused by online hate speech against women,
- Update and amend existing legislation dealing with public order, malicious communications and harassment to reflect the changing nature of communications due to social media,
- Ensure online harm is fully covered within hate crime legislation,
- Strengthen law relating to public authorities tackling hate expressions in public spaces,
- Implement victim-led restorative justice programmes in collaboration with community-based organisations,
- Commission extensive research specific to Northern Ireland to tackle the under-reporting of hate crime and mistrust from minorities in reporting services,
- Adequately fund and expand the Hate Crime Advocacy Scheme,
- Restrict the press reporting of hate crime victims where appropriate,
- Create measures for legislative consolidations and scrutiny.

Online Abuse Against Women

There have been 1,220 reports of online violence towards women in Northern Ireland since 2015 (the total could be even higher than the figures suggest as not all crimes specified the gender of the victim). In 2017-18 the PSNI saw the highest annual figure ever recorded with 433 women feeling so threatened they reported to the police – 30 of these involved death threats with another 394 constituting harassment¹⁹⁴.

The issue of online abuse against women is extremely concerning. It has prompted the creator of the internet, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, to say that “the web is not working for women and girls.¹⁹⁵” Berners-Lee stated that while the world has made important progress on gender equality he is “seriously concerned that online harms facing women and girls – especially those of colour, from LGBTQ+ communities and other marginalised groups – threaten that progress.” Berners-Lee said that “for many who are online, the web is simply not safe enough” and that online abuse:

“forces women out of jobs and causes girls to skip school, it damages relationships and leads to tremendous distress. Relentless harassment silences women and deprives the world of their opinions and ideas, with female journalists and politicians pushed off social media and bullied out of office.”

¹⁹⁴ ITV News (2018), ‘Reports of Online Violence Towards Women in NI’, (available online): <https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2018-12-18/1-220-reports-of-online-violence-towards-women-in-ni/> [accessed 29/06/20].

¹⁹⁵ Why the web needs to work for women and girls, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, March 2020 <https://webfoundation.org/2020/03/web-birthday-31/>

In 2018 Amnesty International published research on ‘Toxic Twitter’¹⁹⁶ which included interviews with journalists, activists and politicians from the UK (including NI) and USA exposing how Twitter is failing to respect women’s rights, and warned the social media company that it must take concrete steps to improve how it identifies, addresses and prevents violence and abuse against women on the platform.

The women’s testimony details the shocking nature of violence and abuse they are receiving on Twitter, including death threats, rape threats and racist, transphobic and homophobic abuse. Public figures, MPs and journalists are often particular targets, but people who aren’t in the public eye are also experiencing abuse, especially if they speak out about issues like sexism and use campaign hashtags. Several recommendations were made and can be viewed [here](#).

In the independent review of hate crime in Northern Ireland, Judge Marrinan acknowledged the issue of hateful abuse online as part of this Review citing the abuse that many women politicians both in Westminster and locally in the Northern Ireland Assembly have to endure often on a daily basis.

This is a significant issue as it has led to the resignation of a number of women MPs in recent years with obvious impacts for gender equality and ensuring that the voices of women are at the table. Heidi Allen stood down because of the “nastiness and intimidation” she faced as a politician. Luciana Berger said the abuse she faced made her “physically ill” so much so that she had to work with the police and security for her personal safety. She described the abuse as “personal and sometimes very extreme in its nature. Sometimes it’s pornographic, sometimes violent, often very misogynistic.”

Online abuse of some of Northern Ireland’s female politicians has prompted calls to establish a cross-party working group on misogyny. Cara Hunter, SDLP MLA and Deputy Mayor of Derry has been subjected to near-constant “sexual and violent messages and threatening voicemails.” DUP MLA Carla Lockhart said that online abuse was something she had become accustomed to. She explained “any time there’s a picture of me on Twitter, no matter what it’s connected with, I will have someone picking on my appearance.”

There is a real need for action to prevent these online behaviours. It is important to have the best people involved in Government representing their communities. It is not possible to achieve this if women feel excluded from these positions due to this type of misogyny and online hate. Women make up half the population and their rights and interests cannot be adequately protected unless women are involved in positions of power and in Government. Misogynistic behaviour of this kind limits women’s representation and visibility not just in politics but in other spheres and it is therefore vital that this is tackled.

Online abuse against women and girls has specific implications, and often has a specific ferocity and disproportionate volume, for racialised women, LGBT+ women, and disabled women. In a

¹⁹⁶ Amnesty International, (2018), ‘Toxic Twitter: A Toxic Place for Women’: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/>

wider UK context, the MP who received the most online abuse during the 2017 election was Diane Abbott¹⁹⁷, the first black woman to be elected MP. Further, online abuse against trans women and girls has skyrocketed in the past number of years, fuelled by animosity in the media, lack of political support, and lack of accountability for multinational social media companies.

The Independent Hate Crime Legislation Review provides an important opportunity for action to be taken on this issue. We have made several recommendations in the WPG consultation response which can be read [here](#).

4.3 Education and Training

Equality and Diversity Education

It is evident from the shocking statistics that vulnerable groups in our society have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. This is true both within Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. People living in low income areas, those with disabilities, older people, and people from minority ethnic backgrounds are all at increased risk of suffering serious illness and death as a result of Covid-19. The pandemic has harshly exposed pre-existing structural divisions and shown the consequences of failing to create a truly equal society. Depending on what happens next, including future government policy, we may be at risk of inequalities deepening even further. As life begins to return to relative normality and children return to school, it is more important than ever before that they receive adequate teaching on equality and diversity.

At present, rather than these themes being integrated across the curriculum, equality and diversity tend only to be focused on particular areas of learning (at primary level) and subjects (at secondary level). Primary school pupils are taught about equality and diversity as one element of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU), but how much time is spent on this will vary. Within secondary schools, it can be even more difficult for teachers to find space to look at these themes because of the focus on academic attainment, though subjects such as Religious Education, History, and English Literature are a more common home for them than Mathematics and Science. Furthermore, teaching on diversity can sometimes become narrowly focused on the traditional sectarian divisions within NI, ignoring other complexities and obscuring the wider picture.

This has specific implications for racialised people in school, where racist bullying may not be handled effectively due to lack of training. It also has implications for LGBT pupils, who are at higher risk of being bullied while also facing institutional barriers to expressing themselves and

¹⁹⁷ Amnesty Insights (2017), 'Unsocial Media: Tracking Twitter Abuse against Women MPs': <https://medium.com/@AmnestyInsights/unsocial-media-tracking-twitter-abuse-against-women-mps-fc28aeca498a>

being who they are safely in an educational environment. Further training and education, for staff and students, would create a safer and more accepting environment for currently marginalised and often disenfranchised pupils. It would also build the foundations for an education system based in safety for all, centred on care, and focused on preparing our children to be tolerant and well-rounded members of society.

Effective teaching of equality and diversity often relies on there being committed teachers within schools who are willing to look for opportunities to explore these themes fully. Sometimes this involves signing up for optional initiatives such as Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning that have a focus on these areas, bringing in appropriate guest speakers and working directly with communities and civil society to improve learning in these areas. Not all schools will believe they have the time and resources to do this, while others will. This leads to a variation in the quality of equality and diversity education across the NI school system, which fails pupils.

Currently, schools are not subject to the requirements within Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, nor the Sex Discrimination (Gender Reassignment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999. There is a significant gap in equality legislation and rights protections across the board in Northern Ireland: nowhere is that more apparent than in our schools.

Current international guidelines for education encourage a focus on diversity and equality. For instance, one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (4.7) states:

“By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.”

It is also worth noting that the NI Curriculum used in schools today was first introduced in 2007. So much has changed since then, particularly in the last few months, that an overhaul could be very beneficial to students.

Recommendations:

- An increased focus on equality and diversity should be introduced into the curriculum when it is next updated.
- While distance learning has to continue, materials should be made accessible to all students so inequalities do not further widen. Opportunities for teaching about equality and diversity through these materials should be considered, particularly when new content is being developed / used.
- Initial teacher training - and subsequent CPD opportunities - should place a greater emphasis on equality and diversity. The teacher competency framework for initial teacher education (ITE) should cover both how to teach about these themes effectively within the

classroom and how to meet pupils' diverse social and educational needs. The latter should include consideration of a wide range of factors that may inhibit children's learning i.e. not just disability, but also covering sexuality or gender identity, etc. Anti-bias training should also be considered.

- Likewise, Principals and senior school managers should, as standard, receive training examining equality and diversity, including the underpinning legislation.
- The Department of Education (DoE) should adequately resource the codevelopment of equality and diversity workshops, for staff and pupils, with community organisations working with racialised, LGBT+, disabled, and migrant communities.
- Regular guidance should be issued to schools by the DoE on equality and diversity.
- Indicators should be introduced into the inspection process that look specifically at how schools are addressing equality and diversity.
- Furthermore, DoE should prioritise measures on equality and diversity explicitly in the processes of school improvement.
- Section 75 requirements and the Sex Discrimination Regulations should be applied to schools, alongside other relevant equality legislation
- Any relevant recommendations on education from international treaty bodies, such as CEDAW, should be adhered to.

Women's Access to Education and Training

The extent to which women more generally 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. The drive behind the introduction of Welfare Reform was to get more people into work. Women need access to education and training to make the move from benefits to work, yet the Government is not supporting this.

COVID-19 has led to huge disruptions to the lives of women, as schools closed and many women faced having to balance home-schooling, childcare, work from home and their own educational needs. The information on the unequal distribution of care and gender equality gaps that remain in the UK highlight the urgent need to prioritise women's access to education and training; particularly as many will have lost their jobs due to COVID-19 or may risk future job losses due to automation with any technological revolution. Intersectional policy-making is needed to address issues such as the digital divide, issues for women from migrant backgrounds struggling with language barriers in supporting children with homeschooling, rural access poverty, limited support for parents with disabled children and more is needed.

Recommendations:

- Provide support to women impacted by welfare reform, past austerity and COVID-19 to enable them to be work ready through the provision of supported community-based education and training.
- Establish a fund to address the disproportionate cuts to the women's sector community adult education.
- Create targets for apprenticeships to ensure a gender balance.
- Urgently address digital poverty and the impact of educational needs of families across all of Northern Ireland; including access to free internet and technology.
- Abide by CEDAW recommendations to:
 - Strengthen efforts to encourage girls to pursue non-traditional subjects and take coordinated measures to encourage girls to take up courses in science, technology, engineering and mathematics;
 - Continue to implement the recommendations of the Women and Equalities Committee contained in the report of October 2018 on sexual harassment of women and girls in public places;
 - Take measures to introduce mandatory age-appropriate education on sexual and reproductive rights in school curricula, including issues such as gender relations and responsible sexual behaviour, throughout the UK;
 - Ensure there are adequate educational campaigns related to any hate crime legislation review, domestic abuse legislation and all other legislative changes;
 - Promote human rights education in schools which includes a focus on the empowerment of girls and the Convention.

5. Brexit and a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland

5.1 Brexit and the Impact on Women: Rights at Risk

Women in Northern Ireland are greatly underrepresented in public and political life. This was clearly evident in the lead up to the Brexit referendum and remains a worrying issue in the current Brexit negotiations. Underrepresentation in political negotiations and decision-making, alongside several other areas lacking in gender parity, such as access to education, training, work, affordable childcare and more, highlight the profoundly negative impact Brexit is set to have on women in Northern Ireland. This is compounded with the political instability creating several barriers to women having their voices heard, and the shifts in focus by governments in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, there are strict deadlines for Brexit negotiations and it is vital that the needs of women in Northern Ireland are represented throughout.

Many areas of women's human rights have yet to be achieved, and Brexit has added a new threat to existing, hard-fought rights women currently have. Northern Ireland faces unique constitutional complexities meaning Brexit presents a unique threat to this region¹⁹⁸. With women's voices being largely absent from negotiations, at a local, national and EU level, it is necessary to analyse the unique and disproportionate impact Brexit will have on the women of Northern Ireland.

Women's Rights Achieved Through EU Membership

Many of the rights we enjoy today have come through membership of the EU over the past four decades; particularly in areas of economic activity and employment law. For women, there are great concerns that Brexit will erode many of these protections. Some of these protections include:

- Equality between men and women¹⁹⁹,
- The right to equal pay for equal work²⁰⁰,
- Protection against discrimination on the ground of pregnancy and maternity²⁰¹,
- Introducing measures to provide specific advantages to the underrepresented gender²⁰²,
- Prohibition of discriminations on the grounds of sex²⁰³,
- Introduction of paid holidays²⁰⁴.

Furthermore, the EU recognises the need for wide-spread structural change to deal with systematic gender discrimination through their commitment to Gender Mainstreaming and the Gender Recast Directive 2006. The Gender Recast Directive covers a range of areas including access to employment, promotion, vocational training schemes and working conditions to ensure the rights of women are considered central to decision making. The Gender Mainstreaming approach involves five main priority areas:

1. Increase women's participation in the labour market,
2. Reduce the gender pay gap, pension gap and levels of poverty women face,
3. Address gender disparity in decision making and promote greater representation of women in public life across a range of sectors,
4. Combat gender-based violence and support victims,
5. Combat gender equality beyond the EU and advocate for women's rights across the world²⁰⁵.

¹⁹⁸ Human Rights Consortium (2018), 'Brexit and Northern Ireland: Rights at Risk Report', (available online): <http://www.humanrightsconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/RIGHTS-AT-RISK-Final.pdf> [accessed 29.06.20], p.32.

¹⁹⁹ The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

²⁰⁰ Article 119 Treaty establishing the European Economic Community.

²⁰¹ This is still an issue in Northern Ireland today: ECNI, Expecting Equality: A Formal Investigation into the Treatment of Pregnant Workers and mothers in Northern Ireland workplaces 2016.

²⁰² EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

²⁰³ Sex and other grounds for discrimination are covered in Article 21, EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

²⁰⁴ According to the NIRWN, Rural Voices Report 2018, p.30: 'Many of the two million workers who had no paid holiday before the Working Time Directive, were part-time working women'; Human Rights Consortium Rights at Risk Report, p.75.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, (n119) p.75

Other areas of EU legislation, representation and funding that are relevant to the protection and enhancement of women's rights and participation include the European Protection order, which is significant in recognising women's rights as they cross the border; the Rural Development Programme, which NIRWN highlight as significant given historic government underinvestment in rural women²⁰⁶; the European Social Fund, which is important to increasing women's access to the workforce; and the European Parliamentary Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, alongside various EU funding streams that support the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland.

What Next for Women's Rights Post-Brexit?

It is deeply concerning that no guarantees have been made to protect, or enhance, the rights mentioned above post-Brexit. The previous Withdrawal Agreement set forward, which had minimal human rights protections, has been rejected by the current Prime Minister and it is unclear if any deal will be reached for UK withdrawal from the EU before the October 31st deadline. Based on previous comments from the UK government, alongside election manifestos and public pledges, there are some worrying insights into the future of women's rights in Northern Ireland.

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

One of the most concerning pledges of the UK government has been to remove the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights from all applications in UK law and judiciary systems. Whilst the UK government would still be required to abide by the European Convention of Human Rights, the removal of the EU Charter is deeply worrying as it has a much broader level of protection for human rights²⁰⁷. Articles relevant to women in Northern Ireland include, but are not limited to, Article 20 on the right to equality before law; Article 21 which prohibits discrimination; Article 23 on the right to equality between men and women; Article 34 on the right to social security (which is significant in cases of maternity pay); and Article 35 on the right to healthcare.

Existing EU Law – Court of Justice of the European Union

Future case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) will no longer be binding in UK courts post-Brexit. Any existing CJEU laws from before Brexit will still be binding, however, these can now be overturned in future cases in UK courts and a departure from current jurisprudence may lead to a divergence on human rights standards on either side of the border in Northern Ireland. As EU human rights instruments will be seen as invalid post-Brexit, it will be

²⁰⁶ NIRWN (2018), 'Rural Voices Report: Action Research and Policy Priorities for Rural Women 2018', (available online): <http://www.nirwn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/NIRWN-Rural-Voices-Research-Report-March-2018.pdf> [accessed 29.06.20], p.5.

²⁰⁷ A comparison of the breadth of the EU Charter and the ECHR can be found in the Human Rights Consortium Rights at Risk Report, p.26-27

difficult to enforce human rights through the courts or hold UK government failures to account in courts outside of the UK.

Human Rights Act 1998

In the lead up to the Brexit referendum, many calls were made to repeal or replace the UK Human Rights Act post-Brexit. Since the 2016 referendum, the UK Government has failed to provide commitments that it will not repeal or replace the Human Rights Act. Many are deeply concerned with the impact this, and the removal of the EU Charter, will have on human rights. The EU human rights framework is much more robust than the UK Human Rights Act, however, the removal of both the Human Rights Act and the EU Charter will make it much more difficult for people to access their rights through the courts, as the ECHR is nowhere near as broad or strong as a standalone human rights framework.

Good Friday Agreement

There have been worrying reinterpretations of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement by the former Prime Minister Theresa May and current Prime Minister Boris Johnson, in a vastly different approach to previous UK Governments, with EU officials accusing Prime Minister Johnson of reneging on pledges to uphold the agreement²⁰⁸. With Northern Ireland still the crux of disagreements on how the UK should leave the EU, and ongoing political instability growing as a concern, it is essential to point out the importance of avoiding a divergence of rights on either side of the border. For example, areas of protections such as violence against women, or child maintenance payments, rely on EU wide measures to ensure the legal systems on the island of Ireland are coordinated to protect vulnerable people through the criminal justice and family law systems²⁰⁹. This is essential to ensure that people cannot avoid the repercussions of violence against women, or refusing to pay child maintenance, by simply crossing the border. All aspects of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement need to be protected and implemented; including a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland where specific focus can be given to the rights of women.

Missed Opportunities: Current EU Work on Rights

There are many missed future opportunities for the enhancement of rights that would benefit the lives of women in Northern Ireland. For example, as highlighted by the Human Rights Consortium, the EU has also sought to extend parental rights to leave²¹⁰ and encourage better

²⁰⁸ See: Rankin, J., (September 2019), 'Johnson has reneged on Good Friday Agreement Vows Says EU', *The Guardian*, (available online): <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/08/johnson-has-reneged-on-good-friday-agreement-vows-says-eu>, [accessed 29.06.20]; see also: Brendan Hughes (May 2020), 'Brexit: Good Friday Agreement Cannot Slip Through The Cracks in US Trade Deal Talks', *Irish News*, (available online): <https://www.irishnews.com/news/brexit/2020/05/08/news/brexit-good-friday-agreement-cannot-slip-through-cracks-in-us-trade-deal-talks-1930539/> [accessed 29.06.20].

²⁰⁹ Ibid, (n119) p.122.

²¹⁰ Directive 2010/18/EU implementing the revised Framework Agreement on parental leave (8 March 2010)

childcare support for families²¹¹ with the strategic aim of reducing the gender pay gap and advancing women's rights more generally. Furthermore, as NIRWN have highlighted²¹², there is a new, ongoing consultation of trade unions and employers launched at EU level focusing on a new package of rights to improve work-life balance, including proposals for carers' leave, flexible working and stronger protections from dismissal for new mothers²¹³. It is worth noting that the EU did not recognise caring work as an economic activity, which meant carers did not have the same equal status of those who were workers, self-employed or seeking residency under the freedom of movement within EU member states. As women undertake the majority of caring responsibilities in Northern Ireland, they were disproportionately impacted by this, arguably discriminatory, approach. With uncertainty of what will happen to the customs union and the freedom of movement across the EU, it is unlikely caring responsibilities, and the rights associated with them, will be improved or advocated for post-Brexit.

It is evident that women in Northern Ireland are in line to face the brunt of the impact of Brexit. The UK Women's Budget Group maintains that women will be adversely impacted by the economic impacts of Brexit²¹⁴. This can only get worse for the women of Northern Ireland, who have greatly suffered from the past decade of austerity and are deeply concerned about the impact of welfare reform²¹⁵ and future austerity on gender equality²¹⁶. The economic consequences of Brexit are set to have disproportionately negative impacts on rural women, disabled women, LGBTQ+ women, women of colour, women living on the border, migrant women and more as they lose many human rights protections and funding streams supporting their participation and empowerment.

Women in Northern Ireland are already facing great barriers due to political instability, an arguably failed peace process, catching up on legislation after three years of a collapsed Assembly, the lack of implementation of the UNSCR 1325, an outdated Northern Ireland Gender Strategy, unprecedented levels of poverty and having limited representation in Brexit negotiations. With the implications that have arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the rights at risk highlighted above are due to worsen as pre-existing inequalities are exacerbated. With all the hard fought women's rights protections won at an EU level now at risk, and many human rights still failing to have been implemented at all, there are many reasons to be deeply concerned about the impact of Brexit on the women in Northern Ireland.

²¹¹ European Platform for Investing in Children - <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1246&langId=> [accessed 29.06.20].

²¹² Ibid, (n127), p.30.

²¹³ TUC, 'Women workers' rights and the risks of brexit', (available online): https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Women_workers_and_the_EU.pdf [accessed 29.06.20].

²¹⁴ UK Women's Budget Group (2017), 'Economic Impact of Brexit on Women', (available online): <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/brexit-pre-budget-nov-2017-final.pdf> [accessed 29.06.20].

²¹⁵ Siobhán HArding, 2019), 'Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives', *Women's Regional Consortium*, (available online): <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Impact%20of%20Ongoing%20Austerity%20Women%27s%20Perspectives.pdf> [accessed 29.06.20].

²¹⁶ NIWEP (2018), 'Women and gender equality in a changing Europe: A roundtable to explore women's priorities in Brexit'.

Recommendation:

In line with our recommendations throughout this recovery plan, we are calling for a gendered approach to policy making relating to Brexit; for equal representation of women in negotiations; and for the hard-won rights for women to be protected and enhanced in Northern Ireland.

5.2 Good Friday Agreement legislation, New Decade, New Approach and a Bill of Rights

GFA legislation and NDNA:

A series of agreements in Northern Ireland in recent years²¹⁷ have made mention of the Bill of Rights without making any actual progress towards delivering a meaningful set of rights.

Indeed, in the New Decade New Approach document, beyond provision for new languages legislation, there is little evidence of positive progress in advancing the legal protection of rights formally. The New Decade New Approach document strays from previous agreements in recent years in that it provides for the (now functioning) Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights. However, with no agreed process for delivery of a meaningful set of rights outcomes when the Committee concludes its work, there is concern that the Committee could simply become the latest delaying tactic in this long running process.

Provision for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, which was to build upon the rights contained within the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) by including supplementary rights influenced by International Standards and our local circumstances, was provided for in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and voted for by an overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland through referendum. This commitment to establishing a framework of human rights that was to run throughout the Agreement and the government institutions it established was to be an important confidence building measure in a society that had just experienced decades of conflict.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), created and tasked by this Agreement with providing advice on the content of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, fulfilled that duty in 2008. The NIHRC advice called for the inclusion of additional economic, social and cultural rights such as: the right to health (including access to gender-sensitive and appropriate healthcare services and information), the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to work (including fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value without distinction of any kind), environmental rights, social security rights and children's rights (including play and

²¹⁷ New Decade New Approach, A Fresh Start, Stormont House Agreement

leisure). It also added to and strengthened many of the civil and political rights contained within the ECHR, for example by suggesting a freestanding right to equality; the prohibition of discrimination; the facilitation of the full and equal participation of women in political and public life; and the right of everyone to be free from violence, exploitation and harassment (including domestic violence or harassment, sexual violence or harassment and gender-related violence and harassment).²¹⁸

A Bill of Rights for NI based on a model advised by the NIHRC would have provided a practical mechanism for the realisation of many of the rights contained within international treaties of which the UK is a signatory. The advice was based on extensive participatory consultation with thousands of people across NI over the course of 8 years, and therefore represents a clear articulation of public opinion in this regard.

In December 2009, the UK government produced a consultation document, which rejected the majority of the advice provided by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. In their reasoning for failing to include the extensive advice of the NIHRC, the government stated that they did not see these additional rights as falling within the test of being particular to Northern Ireland or of not being the most appropriate method to realise the particular rights. Within the consultation document this view was expressed as follows: “It is the Government’s view that the introduction of such rights in Northern Ireland would either be unworkable in practice, or could give rise to unjustified inequalities across the UK.”²¹⁹

Since the 1998 peace agreement there has been a consistent need for a Bill of Rights for NI, given its potential to build confidence within communities that abuses of the past will not be repeated, and that those abuses which did occur will be rectified. However, given the current time of uncertainty created by the UK exit from the EU, the potential repeal of the Human Rights Act, the impact of years of austerity and those of coronavirus, (each of which impact differently on women than on the rest of society, as already explored in this paper), a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland is even more valuable as it could provide assurance and stability that whatever the future of Northern Ireland, the rights of all will be protected, respected and fulfilled.

5.3 Northern Ireland Bill of Rights

As noted above, the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, as provided for in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, was to build upon the rights contained within the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) by including supplementary rights influenced by International Standards and our local circumstances. The NIHRC advice in 2009 drew upon these international instruments in order to advise a number of rights, also noted above, that would particularly help to increase women’s equality.

²¹⁸ The NIHRC Advice can be accessed here: <http://www.nihrc.org/uploads/publications/bill-of-rights-for-northern-ireland-advice-to-secretary-state-2008.pdf>

²¹⁹ Northern Ireland Office Consultation Paper, ‘*A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: Next Steps*’, November 2009, pp 3.15

Since the 2009 advice there have been a number of additional developments which merit consideration for inclusion in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

The Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA) gave further effect to rights from the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) in domestic legislation across the UK and allowed access to UK courts for violations of Convention rights. The development of this legislation was also a key provision of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and took on special significance in Northern Ireland where it acted as one of the key safeguards to prevent against inequalities or abuse of human rights in the exercise of power by the new Stormont Government.

The Conservative government would like to repeal the HRA and replace it with a British Bill of Rights, although some within the party would also like a withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Convention on Human Rights. Recent statements include:

- “If we want to reform human rights laws in this country, it isn’t the EU we should leave but the ECHR and the jurisdiction of its Court.” Theresa May (then Home Secretary) April 2016
- “The Government is committed to scrapping the Human Rights Act and introducing a British Bill of Rights.” Elizabeth Truss, (then) Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, September 2016
- “We will not repeal or replace the Human Rights Act while the process of Brexit is underway but we will consider our human rights legal framework when the process of leaving the EU concludes.” Conservative Party Manifesto 2017
- “There is a discussion to be had around how essential the Human Rights Act is to protecting rights. But with Brexit, now is not the right time to have that discussion.” David Gauke, Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, May 2018
- “We will update the Human Rights Act and administrative law to ensure that there is a proper balance between the rights of individuals, our vital national security and effective government.” Conservative Party Manifesto 2019

The Human Rights Act has been important to the peace here and must be defended. However, it does not represent the full protection of the ECHR. For example, there is no free-standing right to prohibition of discrimination (this is included in Article 1 of Protocol No. 12 of the ECHR, which the UK has not ratified). In order to protect enjoyment of the full range of ECHR rights, they should be fully incorporated into a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

As already explored in this paper, the UK exit from the EU represents a unique threat to rights in the UK. The most obvious loss will be the EU Charter of Rights when the transition period ends. Continued protection of the rights contained within the EU Charter could be achieved by incorporation into a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights.

The two other devolved nations of the United Kingdom, Scotland and Wales, have both made strides to incorporate international standards into domestic decision making. The United Kingdom is a signatory to seven of the nine UN Human Rights Treaties, meaning it has agreed to

be bound by them. However, because of the dualist system of the UK, these rights are not automatically enforceable once the UK becomes a signatory. Scotland and Wales, therefore, have used powers within their own devolved competencies in order to give further effect to the rights in these treaties which represent international obligations to which the UK has agreed to be bound.

The Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 requires that Welsh Ministers, in exercising any of their functions, have due regard to Part 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and also select articles from the first and second optional protocols.²²⁰ Similarly, Part 1 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 imposes duties on Scottish Ministers and other public bodies to comply with UNCRC.²²¹ At the very minimum, the Northern Ireland Assembly could follow similar steps in order to give further effect to treaties such as CEDAW, ICESCR, CRC, ICERD, ICCPR, CRPD and CAT.²²² This would be possible within its own devolved competencies.

However, unlike Scotland and Wales, provision was made for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and this Bill of Rights was to be enacted through Westminster legislation. There is no such limit to the powers of Westminster to legislate as there is for the devolved institutions, therefore complete incorporation of these UN treaties would be possible through a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights.

Recommendations:

- Bring forward a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.
- Complete incorporation of the ECHR.
- Incorporation of the rights contained within the EU Charter of Rights.
- Complete incorporation of CEDAW, ICESCR, CRC, ICERD, ICCPR, CRPD and CAT (including those rights recommended by the NIHRC in their 2009 advice).
- Give further effect to CEDAW, ICESCR, CRC, ICERD, ICCPR, CRPD and CAT through use of devolved powers

²²⁰ For more information, see this briefing to the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights by Professor Simon Hoffman, <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2017-2022/ad-hoc-committee-on-a-bill-of-rights/written-briefings/simon-hoffman-swansea-university/>

²²¹ For more information, see this briefing to the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights by Professor Tobias Lock <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2017-2022/ad-hoc-committee-on-a-bill-of-rights/written-briefings/tobias-lock-professor-of-law-at-maynooth-university/>

²²² Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child, International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

6. International Best Practice

The UK, including Northern Ireland, has obligations in international law to recognise gender-based violence against women as a specific human rights issue. As a State Party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UK is required to take action on gender equality, which the Convention defines as a prerequisite to women and girls enjoying their full human rights. The overall aim of CEDAW is to strengthen gender equality, and the CEDAW Committee has highlighted the importance of action in Northern Ireland in their Concluding Observations to all recent periodic reports submitted by the UK. The most recent Concluding Observations (2019) emphasise putting protections for women in Northern Ireland on an equal footing with protections elsewhere in the UK.

The UK is also a member of the Council of Europe - it established the integration of gender equality as one of its policy goals. The Council has adopted Standards for Gender Equality, which set out a list of measures to be taken across policy areas, including violence against women. The Standards state that ‘Violence against women is one of the most serious violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and an obstacle to the enjoyment of those rights and freedoms. Furthermore, violence against women is a waste of capacities and resources for economic and social development; it is also one of the means by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men and is, therefore, a decisive impediment to the achievement of gender equality’. In 2011, the Council adopted the Istanbul Convention on preventing violence against women and combating domestic violence, which sets out clear standards for states to implement. Compliance with requirements is essential to enable states to ratify the Convention; the UK is yet to ratify. It is vital that concerned action across the UK is taken to ensure the UK is compliant with the Convention and can complete ratification.

Case Studies:

6.1 Amnesty International UK - International Outlook

In May 2020, Amnesty International, Women’s Link Worldwide and International Planned Parenthood Federation published ‘A Guide for Europe: Protecting the Rights of Women and Girls in times of Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath’.

The guide highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic —like all crises—has a distinct impact on women and girls that is both immediate and that poses the risk of exacerbating pre-existing gender-based and other intersecting inequalities. This crisis has exposed the structural and systemic discrimination that women and girls have long faced. The women and girls who already experience marginalisation are being differentially and disproportionately affected by the

pandemic. Unless their rights are protected, their voices are heard and their needs are met, they will be further deprived of justice.²²³

The United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, the Council of Europe, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and other regional and international bodies have issued clear guidelines that States should use to respond to the pandemic in line with their human rights obligations. States need to live up to their obligations to address the gender-based violence and discrimination faced by women and girls, including trans women, and by non-binary, gender non-conforming and intersex persons. Specific measures are required to minimise the short and long term impacts this health and economic crisis may have on them, their families, and their communities. As UN Women has noted, violence against women is “the most widespread human rights violation in the world.”²²⁴

The guide outlines urgent actions Governments should undertake to protect the rights of women and girls and can be viewed in full [here](#).

6.2 Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform - International Outlook

The European Women’s Lobby (EWL), which is the umbrella network for women’s networks in Europe, integrates a focus on feminist economics in its work. EWL has developed proposals for a [financial solidarity plan](#) for Europe in response to the pandemic, which aim to ensure that the recovery is gender responsive, not only at European level but in all EU member states. While the UK is no longer a member of the EU, the proposals in the plan are relevant to both the UK as a whole and to Northern Ireland. They are focused on a recovery which is based on a human rights framework and on feminist economics.

The plan²²⁵ is structured on the understanding that the COVID-19 crisis has not created new gender inequalities, but has highlighted and deepened existing inequalities, which are perpetuated by current economic models. It proposes, at its core, a raising of the ‘social floor’ to strengthen social and economic security for everyone and is based on four key principles:

1. Supporting equality and protecting democratic principles
2. Combatting male violence

²²³ Amnesty International, Women’s Link Worldwide and International Planned Parenthood Federation -. A Guide for Europe: Protecting the rights of women and girls in times of Covid19 pandemic and its aftermath <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR0123602020ENGLISH.PDF>

²²⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR0123602020ENGLISH.PDF>

²²⁴ *ibid*.

²²⁵ European Women’s Lobby (April 2020) [Women must not pay the price for COVID-19!](#)

3. Realising feminist economics

4. Building an equal health system

The brief emphasises that women must be equally represented in decision-making processes and women's civil society organisations must be sustainably funded both in the immediate and longer term. There are also specific recommendations for combating male violence and supporting victims and survivors, and ensuring women and girls have access to health care, including reproductive health care.

Key recommendations for an economic response and recovery include:

- Providing gender-responsive social and economic measures to support women and girls in precarious situations, including
 - those at risk of losing their jobs,
 - at risk of living in poverty,
 - and/or experiencing in-work poverty.
- Adequate financial support that extends to women working precarious jobs irrespective of their legal status, including:
 - lump sum payments for qualifying individuals including disabled women,
 - tax relief measures,
 - subsidising of goods and services,
 - allowing caregivers and working parents the right to a special leave that guarantees 100% of their income (in the immediate crisis and early stage recovery).
- Introduce temporary special measures to protect women from facing the brunt of the implications of economic recession and austerity (on top of pre-existing measures).
- Ensure alternatives to austerity are identified in response to the economic crisis.

The policy brief also highlights examples of good practice from across Europe. Some examples include:

Domestic violence:

- Austria: expanded economic support to victims of domestic violence during the crisis.
- Spain: increased access to emergency shelters alongside a comprehensive information campaign and measures for victims to access help and support through pharmacies.

- Several European countries including Spain, the Netherlands and Italy, designated staff in organisations providing support to victims and survivors of domestic violence as key workers.

Childcare:

- Italy: temporary measures for families and women, including the extension of parental leave and bonuses for child carers at home. A lump sum of 600 euros is also being given to almost five million workers, including the self-employed.
- Czech Republic: parents of children under 13 can claim 60% of their salary from the state while taking care of children.

Health care:

- Belgium: contraceptives free for all women under 25 (these initiatives have also been taken previously in other countries, but often not comprehensively: for example in Finland, health care is devolved to local authorities and free contraceptives for under 25s have been trialled in some local authority areas, while others have actively resisted this),
- Latvia: announcement of pay increase for frontline health workers of at least 20%.

6.3 The Purple Pact: economics that works for women

The EWL proposals for COVID-19 recovery draw above all on [The Purple Pact](#)²²⁶, an EWL initiative launched in early 2020, which sets out principles for feminist economics in Europe. The aim of the Pact is economic wellbeing for all and full participation of women in all areas of life, and it also emphasises that feminist economics strives for peace and wellbeing for all, on a healthy planet.

The core proposal of the Pact is a new economic framework based on three pillars:

1. A new macro-economic policy framework encompassing three fundamental dimensions: economic justice, social justice and environmental justice
2. A universal social care system with an infrastructure that can provide social and care services for all and quality services which are accessible and affordable.
3. An inclusive labour market where equality, social protection and caring take centre stage.

The Purple Pact highlights key elements within existing economic models that work against gender equality and wellbeing for all.

The key issues highlighted include:

²²⁶ European Women's Lobby (March 2020) *The Purple Pact: A feminist approach to the economy*

- GDP has limitations as a measure of economic well being, and critically does not include the value of unpaid care and voluntary work, which means that this is ignored in economic decision-making. Failure to address this, along with failure to address environmental degradation, sends harmful signals to public and private decision-makers and encourages unsustainable investment and consumption patterns.
- Education must be treated as an investment, rather than an expenditure as is current practice in national accounts. Education is critical for a future sustainable economy, and is also an investment in the prevention of future burdens in relation to health, crime, unemployment and so on.
- The financialisation of the economy works against the productive activities that directly contribute to the employment and wellbeing of most people. Similarly, unfair tax competition between states in Europe, where labour is taxed much more stringently than capital income and states are allowed to create tax incentives for multinational corporations, creates perverse conditions that in practice encourage tax evasion and fuel economic and political corruption.

Key recommendations for action in The Purple Pact includes:

- Introduce gender budgeting as a tool to highlight how budgets impact men and women differentially, and make sure public finance and economic policies work for gender equality,
- Develop and invest in a care economy, where quality, accessible care is available to all and the provision of care is valued as a vital economic activity; this would also contribute to job creation, sustaining a green economy as outlined previously in this plan,
- Developing human rights based sustainable care infrastructure, which takes account of the care needs of an older population, supports the autonomy and agency of service users and addresses the unpaid care burden currently primarily shouldered by women,
- Ensuring developments such as the digital economy do not disadvantage women further; ensuring women's participation in developing the digital economy to support both gender sensitive digital technologies and effective job creation,
- Implementing concepts of decent work, particularly in the 'gig economy'; for example app based 'self employment' options are precarious for all but in particular for women.

6.4 Initiatives at UN level

The UN is working with business to promote the Sustainable Development Goals and encourage companies at all levels to invest in solutions that promote a greener, fairer, safer and more resilient economy. Under the UN Global Compact²²⁷, companies align their working practices with 10 business principles that focus on human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption. The UN Global Compact has developed a series of policy briefs designed to guide stakeholders on policy and practical action designed to support companies to recover stronger and build back

²²⁷ See <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/> for further information, accessed 29 June 2020

better²²⁸. These include a brief on gender equality²²⁹, which emphasises the critical role women play in sustainable and resilient economies, while highlighting the specific gendered issues and risks that the pandemic has underlined. The brief also provides access to resources developed within the UN, including gender impact assessment tools and checklists for gender responsive recovery. Actions recommended by the Compact in this brief include:

- Ensure women's representation and inclusion in all planning and decision-making, specifically with COVID-19-related policies and responses.
- Provide flexible working arrangements as well as paid sick, family and emergency leave for parents and caretakers, keeping in mind that the majority of unpaid care work falls to women.
- Support employment and income protection for women across the value chain.
- Honour existing contracts with women-owned businesses, support their recovery and engage with them as supply chains are re-established.
- Ensure access to quality healthcare for all women and girls — especially as resources are diverted to address the pandemic.
- Collect data disaggregated by gender, age and other factors to track the impact of all response efforts.
- Help challenge gender norms through marketing and advertising, encouraging unpaid care to be shared more equally.
- Chief executive officers and executive teams can publicly signal their commitment to the advancement of gender equality — particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic — by signing the CEO Statement of Support for the Women's Empowerment Principles.

The UN is also working with business and finance companies at the global level to encourage investment in COVID-19 recovery, including taking action on debt – from individual to national debt - supporting solvent but illiquid small business and developing new ways of working across sectors. UN Women, the UN's agency for gender equality, has been very active both in providing concrete support, particularly in vulnerable countries, and developing guidance for stakeholders on how gender equality can be effectively integrated in COVID-19 response and recovery.

UN Women has been particularly active in highlighting the need for action to protect women and girls from gender based violence - this has been reflected throughout the UN response to the pandemic. A key briefing²³⁰ highlights the increase in violence that has been a global trend, sets out examples of action taken in a number of jurisdictions, and also outlines the economic impact of violence against women and girls, estimated at US \$1.5 trillion. The key actions set out for governments include ensuring appropriate resourcing for organisations supporting victims and survivors of gender based and domestic violence, and also ensuring women are at the centre of policy change, response and recovery. A critical element needed is sex-disaggregated data to fully

²²⁸ <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/take-action/20th-anniversary-campaign/uniting-business-to-tackle-covid-19>, last accessed 29 June 2020

²²⁹ UN Global Compact (2020) [COVID-19 Impact Brief: Gender Equality](#)

²³⁰ UN Women (April 2020) [COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls](#)

understand the impact of COVID-19 on women, domestic violence and also on the economic activities of women.

UN Women has also published guidance²³¹ on actions parliamentarians and governments can take to ensure gender equality is integrated into COVID-19 recovery and response. This guidance emphasises that women are overrepresented in the economic sectors hardest hit by the pandemic, and also overrepresented in informal and precarious work. It also highlights evidence from previous disease outbreaks, such the Ebola outbreak (2014 - 2016), which shows how this affects women's access to work and consequently exasperates barriers to being able to provide for their families.

Recommendations from UN Women:

- Ensuring that any emergency response and recovery legislation, emergency and/or relief packages and budgets have been developed on the basis of sex-disaggregated data, gender analysis and consultations with gender experts, and include a gender impact assessment.
- Introducing or supporting amendments to response and recovery legislation, stimulus packages and budgets, social protection policies – or introducing new legislation – that seek to rectify any identified sources of gender discrimination or exacerbate gender inequality.
- Establishing a gender-focused parliamentary body.
- Using gender budgeting tools to assess the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance and impact of COVID-19 related policy measures on women and girls.
- Engaging gender experts, civil society and trade unions to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the impacts of COVID-19.

7.NI Assembly Recommendations

Throughout this plan, a wide range of recommendations has been made for each Department and the wider Executive in Northern Ireland. Much of this has been connected to commitments in the New Decade, New Approach Agreement (NDNA) in relation to strategies and commitments made by the NI Executive. The content in this plan can inform the aims of each of the equality strategies that need to be created to inform the Program for Government. In addition to the NDNA commitments, this plan has made recommendations based on years of legislation that has been long overdue in Northern Ireland (for example pay gap regulations; commitments to address women's participation) alongside recommendations for legislation that is currently under review (for example, hate crime and domestic violence).

A summary of the key asks for each Department will be sent to the relevant Ministers.

²³¹ UN Women (June 2020) [A primer on parliamentary action: Gender sensitive responses to COVID-19](#)

Most significantly, this plan is addressing the need for NI policy makers to urgently move beyond gender-neutral policy making in order to prevent the further exacerbation of gender inequality in Northern Ireland. COVID-19 has had a disproportionately negative impact on the women in Northern Ireland, and this will not be solved if policymakers continue to apply gender-neutral thinking to their plans. The recommendations in this plan highlight the economic, social, health and political merits of applying gendered thinking and gender budgeting to policy decisions. If the NI Executive truly wants to end gender inequality in Northern Ireland, we need to see a commitment to substantive acknowledgement of the gendered harms of COVID-19 and meaningful steps to address these.

The WPG has consistently provided evidence of the gendered impact of COVID-19, and to date, this evidence has been largely ignored by the NI Executive. If this continues to be the case, women will suffer disproportionately for many years to follow as we move beyond the pandemic and decades of progress on gender equality will be lost.

We want to work with the government, and all departments, to ensure that all policymakers are aware of the negative impact certain policy decisions are having on women. We have the expertise to inform COVID-19 recovery planning and we have the evidence needed to inform relevant strategies, legislation and the Programme for Government.

8. UK Government Recommendations

Throughout this recovery plan, we have acknowledged that some of our asks are on a UK-wide level, and will require interventions from Westminster. Most significantly, we are calling for gender budgeting to be applied to the UK government response as we move towards COVID-19 recovery.

As the evidence in this plan highlights, the past decade of austerity significantly harmed women across the UK. Any recovery to follow cannot be on the backs of women who have already borne the brunt of this crisis economically. Creative policy-making and alternatives to austerity are imperative for the sake of women across the UK.

We are calling for government stimulus packages funded through significant tax reform, increased government borrowing in an era of historically low interest rates, alongside more creative fiscal and monetary policy decisions. The ever-increasing levels of poverty across the UK are indicative of the failings of austerity; particularly for women. The continuance of austerity is untenable.

The recommendations in this plan are based on evidence from women across the UK, trade unions, human rights organisations, medical professionals alongside international best practice. The UK government is responsible for the human rights of all UK citizens, and that includes

Northern Ireland. The UK globally has a long way to go to address the gender gap that prevails, and this Feminist Recovery Plan provides a roadmap of how this can be done in relation to the economy, health, social justice, culture and in the handling of Brexit.

In particular, the UK government needs to take action to:

- Address the funding shortfalls in Northern Ireland beyond the Barnett consequential allocations;
- Provide alternatives to austerity;
- Introduce a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights;
- Negotiate a Brexit deal which will benefit Northern Ireland;
- Take measures to ensure recovery plans for COVID-19 dismantle the deep systemic inequalities that exist across the UK rather than exacerbate them.

A summary of all UK-wide recommendations, including monetary and fiscal policy recommendations, will be sent to all MPs and the Prime Minister.

9. Summary and Conclusion

This Feminist Recovery plan provides a roadmap to recovery that will address gender inequality in Northern Ireland. This plan has been created by experts working in women's rights, LGBT+ sector, human rights, trade unions, campaigning organisations, rural groups NGOs and more. This plan has provided significant evidence under the multiple pillars. A summary of the areas of evidence and subsequent WPG recommendations includes:

1. Economic Justice Pillar:
 - Women's Employment
 - Gender Segregation and Care Work
 - Women's Poverty and Austerity
 - Increasing Debt
 - Rural Women
 - Housing
 - Feminist Green New Deal
 - Paramilitary Control of Finances
2. Health Pillar:
 - Additional Mental Health Impacts and Trauma
 - Increased support for marginalised groups including LGBT+ people, racialised people, disabled women, trans women, migrant women and tackling health inequalities and hostile health environments for migrant women,
 - Ramifications of Cancelled Cancer Screenings,
 - Increased Waiting Lists,

- Impact of Austerity on Health,
 - Reproductive Healthcare, Maternal Health and Bodily Autonomy
3. Social Justice Pillar
- Racial justice,
 - Women in Politics, Public Life, Peacebuilding and Decision Making,
 - Restorative Justice,
 - Digital Divides and Access Poverty,
 - No Recourse to Public Funds and Immigration
 -
4. Cultural Pillar
- Women and Girls in the Media
 - Rape Culture,
 - Violence Against Women,
 - Hate Crimes and Online Abuse,
 - Education and Training
5. Brexit and a NI Bill of Rights - Rights at Risk
6. International Outlooks - Best Practice Case Studies

Experts have provided evidence under each pillar of this plan and our recommendations are clear - the recovery from COVID-19 cannot come on the backs of women. If the recommendations throughout this plan are taken on board, significant progress will have been made to tackle deep gender inequality in Northern Ireland.

For questions or queries regarding the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan, please contact Rachel Powell, Women's Sector Lobbyist, Women's Resource and Development Agency, rachel.powell@wrda.net