



Women's
Policy Group NI

NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan

Recommendations:

Department for Communities

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Abstract

The evidence and contents of this report contain recommendations specific to the Department for Communities, taken from the NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan, which was published by the Women's Policy Group in July 2020.

The Feminist Recovery Plan highlights the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women, and how it has exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities, and sets out recommendations for action.

Some of the recommendations in this summary will also be relevant for other NI Departments, as well as the UK Government. Although the Department for Communities will not have direct responsibility for all issues raised in this report, we believe these should be brought to the attention of the Department, as its remit is broad and has overall responsibility for the development and implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy. The WPG also believe that an inter-departmental approach is crucial to tackling the issues raised in this report.



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

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. In this way, the current crisis affects men and women differently, and in many cases deepens the inequalities women experience on an everyday basis. 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 2019. 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.

The WPG Feminist Recovery Plan analyses 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. 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. 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. We recognise that some issues highlighted in the full WPG Feminist Recovery Plan will be of a devolved nature for the Northern Ireland Assembly, others will be issues that require Westminster intervention.

Women's Policy Group NI

Women's Policy Group (WPG) NI: 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.



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

The Feminist Recovery Plan was prepared by:

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The content of this Plan 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 (WRDA)
Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
Transgender NI (Trans NI)
Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA)
Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) Northern Ireland Committee
Reclaim the Night (RTN) Belfast
Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ)
Politics Plus
Belfast Feminist Network (BFN)
HERE NI
Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP)
Reclaim the Agenda (RTA)
Alliance for Choice
Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland
Women's Support Network (WSN)
DemocraShe
Raise Your Voice (RYV)

Based on the evidence outlined in each section of the Plan, recommendations will be made for gender-responsive budgeting and policy-making to both the NI Assembly and UK governments. The Feminist Recovery plan advocates 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.



Economic Justice Pillar

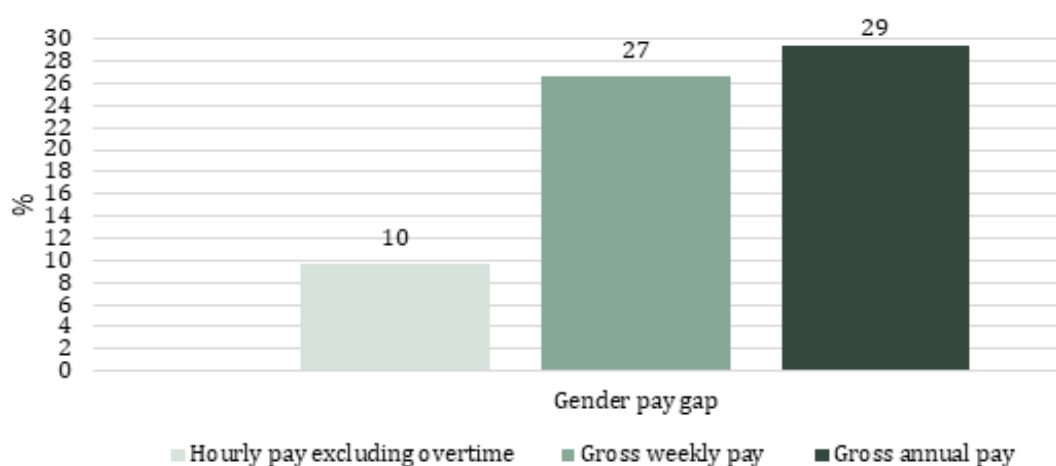


Women's Employment and Gender Pay Gap Reporting

Women in Northern Ireland continue to be more likely to be in insecure and part-time employment, and whilst the overall gender pay gap in NI is the lowest in the UK, women still earn on average around 9.6% less than men¹. Having dependent children significantly amplifies this difference and women responsible for dependent children are more likely to be in insecure, part time work. 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. 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*²

¹ PwC (2019) '[Women in Work Index Summary](#)'; which analyses female economic empowerment in the UK.

² ICTU (2019) '[Better Work, Better Lives: Childcare in Northern Ireland](#)' Policy Report.

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. **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.** 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. **Women with dependent children work an average of 11 hours less per week than men with dependent children.** 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.

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 maternity³. 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. Sex discrimination at work is not an isolated phenomenon, and is closely connected to rates of domestic violence in society.



³ Equality Commission Northern Ireland (2019), '[Pregnancy and Maternity Discrimination Remains an Issue for Working Mothers](#)'

Domestic violence creates a negative spillover effect on the world of work, as recognised by the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) and its accompanying Recommendation (No. 206)⁴. 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)).

Therefore, sex discrimination and domestic violence must be understood as connected issues with implications for both private and public spheres of life.

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 harassment⁵.



⁴ ILO, '[Eliminating Violence and Harassment in the World of Work](#)' [Website]

⁵ ICTU (2019), '[NIC-ICTU survey reveals shockingly high levels of under-reporting of sexual harassment at work](#)'

Summary of Recommendations

- * Introduce a duty on employers to proactively tackle sexual harassment at work to include mandatory training for all employees including managers and HR personnel.
- * 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.
- * 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.
- * 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.



Gender Segregated Labour Markets & Care Work

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. This gender pay gap is likely to worsen due to the economic impact of COVID-19, which not only has negative consequences for women, but the economy as a whole. Findings from the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report 2020⁶ highlight the strong correlation between a country's gender gap and its economic performance. 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 development”

⁶ World Economic Forum (2020) '[Global Gender Gap Report 2020](#)' p. 30.

When looking specifically at Northern Ireland, 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. Research from Carers NI shows that Northern Ireland's carers save the economy £4.6 billion per year⁷; whilst unpaid carers across all the UK provide social care worth £57 billion per year⁸.

The burden on women to provide the majority of unpaid care in society has increased significantly in the context of Covid-19.

What has become clear, 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.

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 following recommendations to fund adequate investments and to oppose the implementation of further austerity.

⁷ Carers NI (2015), '[NI Carers save government £4.6 billion a year](#)'; see also: Carers NI (2017) '[State of Caring 2017](#)'

⁸ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2017), '[Unpaid carers provide social care worth £57 billion](#)'

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Monitor gender parity in the professions of the future.
- * Promote conciliation measures and actions finalised to increase equal opportunities in both education and work⁹. For example, introduce family policies, social protection systems and measures aimed at reducing gender inequalities, and encourage higher education and job opportunities for women.
- * Analyse the economic value of putting money into caring, which will help carers get back into paid employment and thus improve their health and financial wellbeing and consequently reduce pressure on the health and benefits systems in the long-run.
- * For a better, more resilient economy, care work must be recognised as a valued job. This means making sure it pays well, attracts investment in education and training, and provides opportunities for promotion.
- * Sustainably fund the women's sector so that no woman is left in danger.
- * Require employers to report the numbers of people made redundant with breakdowns by gender and other protected characteristics.
- * Require the re-initiation (or implementation in the NI context) of gender pay gap reporting; including reporting on pay gaps during the COVID-19 lockdown.
- * Design a sustainable and stable social care system which is free to the point of use for all citizens, with well paid, well trained permanent staff and funded via general taxation.

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⁹ Castellane, R. et. al. (2019), '[Analyzing the gender gap in European labour markets at the NUTS-1 level](#)', Cogent Social Sciences, Vol 5 (1).

- * Introduce policies to encourage sharing of care and unpaid work between women and men.
- * Provide better information and advice for carers, forward planning, and support so that there is a reliable and sustainable care economy which is fit for purpose.
- * Require all workplaces to record and publish gender segregation and gender pay gap data.
- * 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.
- * Significant increase in funding for the health and social care system to allow services to rebuild after the crisis, alongside bringing forward plans for long-term reform of social 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.
- * 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.
- * Schools, colleges and universities should be encouraged to introduce policies and programmes that support carers and improve their experience of education



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.¹⁰ 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. 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.¹¹

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 year¹². Before the pandemic, women were already more likely to experience poverty; however, in the current climate, job losses and the need to provide increasing levels of unpaid care are likely to increase poverty and dependence on social security benefits, especially for women.

Women make up the majority of Universal Credit claimants, a figure which has risen significantly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- * The first eight weeks of the pandemic saw an 80% increase in claimants (between 1st March and 26th April 2020)
- * Between 13th March 2020 and 14th May 2020, there were 2.4 million new applicants to Universal Credit
- * As of 9th July 2020, there were 5.6 million people on Universal Credit in total; a figure which will continue to increase as the economic consequences of the pandemic continue to be felt¹³.

¹⁰ Cracknell, R., and Keen, R. (2017) "Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes" [Commons Briefing Papers](#) SN06758,

¹¹ Institute for Social and Economic Research (2020) [Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study](#). COVID-19 Survey, Briefing Note, University of Essex.

¹² Black, J. (2020) ["Coronavirus crisis sees demand for foodbanks in Northern Ireland soar"](#), Belfast Telegraph [article]

¹³ Women's Regional Consortium (2020) ["The Impact of Universal Credit on Women"](#) funded by the Department for Communities (DfC) and Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).



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, Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (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.¹⁴

Summary of Recommendations

- * Direct payments in lieu of school meals should continue until 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:
 - o The basic levels of Universal Credit should be increased in line with real living wages indefinitely to support those who have lost their jobs.
 - o At the very least Government should hold on to the increase in the standard allowance to help people get back on their feet while we go in and out of lockdowns.
 - o 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.
 - o 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.

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¹⁴ Women's Budget Group (WBG) (2020) '[Easing Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women](#)' [Briefing Paper]

- 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).
- * Scrap the two-child limit in Tax Credits and Universal Credit which would help to protect against an increase in child poverty, and consider 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.
- * The Benefit Cap mitigation should be extended to new claimants. 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).



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 means that debt advice agencies will be inundated when the impact of the crisis on people's personal finances becomes evident in the coming months. Research from the Financial Conduct Authority in 2018¹⁵ shows that compared with the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland levels of savings are generally lower. Only 52% of adults in Northern Ireland have a saving account (compared to 59% in the UK), with more than half of adults in Northern Ireland (54%) having either no cash savings or savings of less than £2,000 compared with 46% in Wales, 45% in England and 43% in Scotland. This leaves them less able to cope with any sudden change of circumstances or income, such as those 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.

As of June 2020, StepChange estimated that 4.6 million people had accumulated an additional £1,076 of arrears and £997 of debt on average each because of the health crisis.¹⁶

¹⁵ Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) (2018) '[The financial lives of consumers across the UK: Key findings from Financial Lives Survey 2017](#)'

¹⁶ StepChange (2020) '[Coronavirus and personal debt: a financial recovery strategy for households](#)'

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 Children¹⁷ 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. Citizens Advice reports¹⁸ 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.

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.**

¹⁷ Save the Children and Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2020) "[A lifeline for our children: Strengthening the social security system for families with children during this pandemic.](#)" [Briefing]

¹⁸ Citizens Advice (2016) "[Coronavirus claimants facing further hardship in wait for Universal Credit](#)" [Press Release]

Before the pandemic, research by the Women's Regional Consortium¹⁹ 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. Other pre-crisis Office of National Statistics (ONS) data²⁰ shows that women are consistently more vulnerable to poverty.

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%).²¹ An alarming 42% of single parents are anticipating living on less than £500 per month²², due to the Covid-19 pandemic. 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.

39% of women and 34% of men reported it was a struggle to pay 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.

¹⁹ Women's Regional Consortium (2020) [Making Ends Meet: Women's Perspectives on Access to Lending](#).

²⁰ ONS (2020) 'Early indicator estimates from the Wealth and Assets Survey: Bills and Credit Commitments, April 2018 to September 2019'

²¹ Northern Ireland Assembly (2014) Census 2011 – Key Statistics for Gender, Research and Information Service [Research Paper](#), Ronan Savage and Dr Raymond Russell.

²² Turn2US (2020) Insight [Briefing](#): Coronavirus

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. 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.

Summary of Recommendations:

- * 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).
- * 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 (affordable repayments without increasing their debt or incurring poor credit ratings).

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- * Financial support through the benefits system and through crisis payments is central to preventing crisis borrowing. 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. 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 grants instead of loans.
- * Sufficient funding should be made available to debt advice agencies to continue with their free debt advice services and 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 giving 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.

Childcare

We acknowledge that the responsibility of implementing a Childcare Strategy and funded Childcare Provision is the responsibility of the Department of Education. However, given the widespread societal benefits of implementing a childcare provision, particularly in aiming to achieve gender equality, it is crucial that the Department for Communities and all other Departments fully support the urgent creation and implementation of a childcare strategy and provision.

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. 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.



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.

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. 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 this²³.

Research suggests that **as many as 10,000 childcare settings may be unable to reopen after COVID-19**, with roughly 75% blaming financial difficulties for this and 25% referencing fears of parents being able to afford or need the childcare they had previously employed²⁴. 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 our economy while childcare options remain extremely limited²⁵. 47% of families in Northern Ireland rely on support from other family members for childcare to enable them to access the workforce²⁶.

**40.7% of
workers in
Northern
Ireland have
dependent
children.**

²³ See Childcare for All Campaign Statements on Childcare and COVID-19 ([June 2020](#)); and ([May 2020](#)).

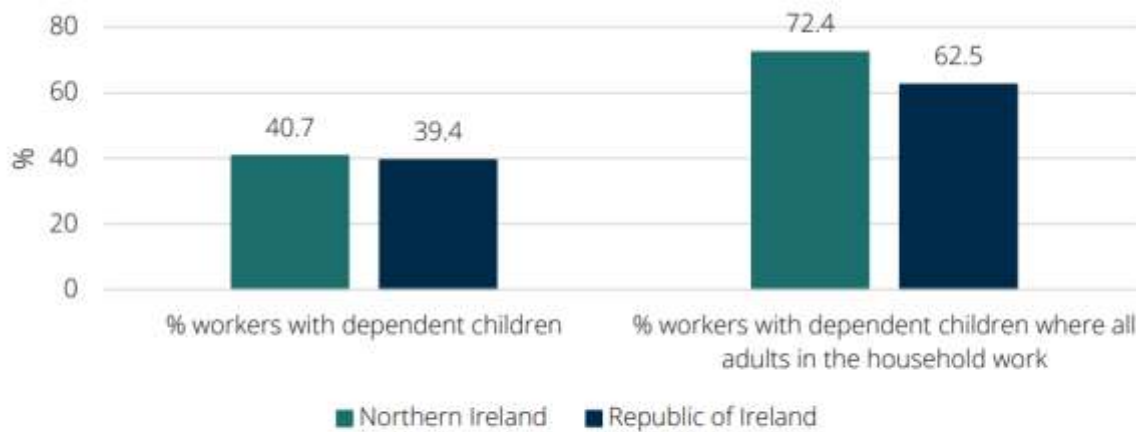
²⁴ Adams, R. (2020), '[UK childcare industry 'crushed' by coronavirus crisis](#)', The Guardian [article], see also: Berry, C. (2020), '[If we need childcare to reopen the UK economy, why is it so undervalued?](#)', The Guardian [article].

²⁵ Dr Lisa Wilson, (May 2020), '[Employment and access to childcare during the Covid-19 crisis](#)', Nevin Economic Research Institute, p.3.

²⁶ Ibid, p.5.

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.

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

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 work²⁷. The lack of an adequate childcare provision in Northern Ireland, means that women will continue to face barriers to accessing work, education and training. and more women will have to work outside the home, or struggle with unemployment.



²⁷ UK WBG et. al., (May 2020), '[Half of parents with young children struggling to make ends meet](#)', UK WBG, Fawcett Society, QMUS and LSE.

These barriers are exacerbated by the rising cost of childcare provision in Northern Ireland. Research from the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey in 2019²⁸ shows that 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.

Furthermore, 50% of families report spending more than 20% of their overall household income on childcare (this rises to 63% for lone parents) and 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).

More than 50% of people in Northern Ireland think there is a lack of sufficient childcare in their area, and 45% of mothers attributed a change in their working hours to the cost of childcare. 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.

The cost of not providing accessible and affordable childcare not only impact on parents, but on the economy in general. A recent Trades Union Congress (TUC) report²⁹ shows how failing to provide such childcare runs the risk of:

“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.”³⁰

²⁸ Employers for Childcare (2019), '[Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019](#)'

²⁹ Trades Union Congress (TUC) (2020), '[Forced out: The cost of getting childcare wrong](#)'

³⁰ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2017), '[Unpaid carers provide social care worth £57 billion](#)', p.2.



The gendered nature of this issue is evidenced by the fact that five years after a child's birth, only 13% of mothers have increased earnings compared to 26% of fathers³¹. Women's employment is also most likely to be affected, with 56.2% of mothers having to make a change to their employment due to childcare, compared to 22.4% of fathers³². Furthermore, 87% of men in paid work were full-time workers compared to 59% of women³³. Since the crisis began, mothers have been 1.5 times more likely than dads to have quit or lost their job or been furloughed³⁴. In particular, we would like to reference TUC concerns³⁵ that:

“Women with caring responsibilities and those returning from 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... 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 [...]

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ ONS (2019) [Families and the Labour Market](#), p.6.

³⁴ Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) (2020) '[How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?](#)'

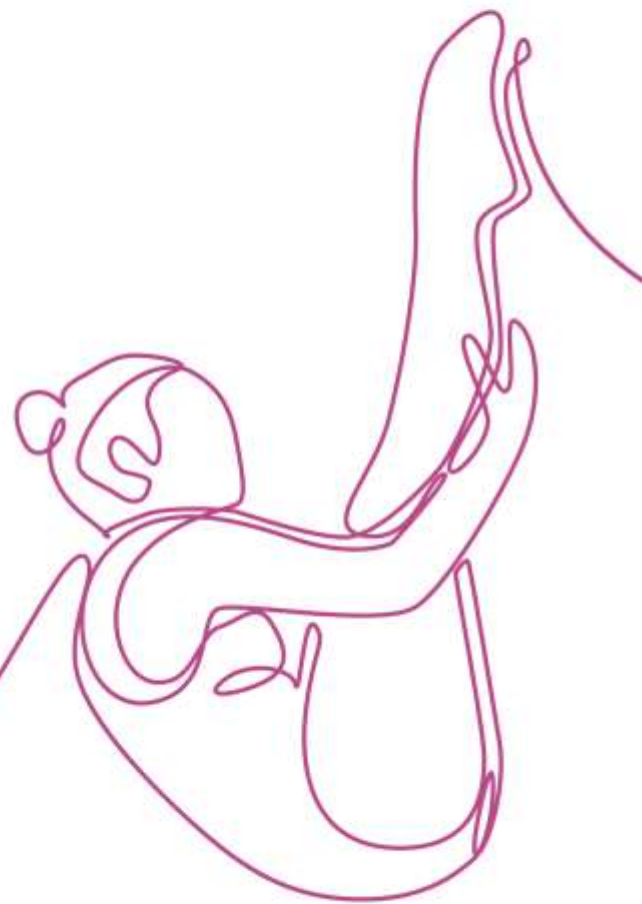
³⁵ *Ibid.* 27, p.4.

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. The current situation regarding pay and job quality shows that workers are underpaid and undervalued. *If childcare is to become an important and valued service, then the workers who provide that service also require to be valued.*

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.

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.



Summary of 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 CEDAW recommendations, noting the particular reference to Northern Ireland, calling on the Government to introduce a costed Childcare Strategy that is underpinned by legislation, meets the needs of children, parents, childcare providers and benefits 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; providing a mechanism to introduce a skills and wage infrastructure so as to improve job quality.
- * Promoting family friendly policies and practices across all sectors to reduce barriers to women accessing and progressing in the workforce.

Rural Women

Issues faced by rural women should not solely be the concern of the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Rural women account for 40% of all women in NI, and the responsibility to support rural women falls to all departments, including the Department for Communities.

Gender inequality is amplified for women in rural areas due to Access Poverty³⁶. 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 areas³⁷. Women in NI remain under-represented in public and political life³⁸ and rural women's participation in public and political life is further hindered by geography and distance from decision making spaces.

Even within the wider women's sector, rural women still need a stronger voice and increased Government funding³⁹. A recent report found that 98.7% of Government funding for service delivery to women's groups went towards urban groups, compared with 1.3% for rural groups⁴⁰.

NIRWN is the only dedicated rural women's network and 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). 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.

³⁶ DAERA (2016) Public [Consultation](#) on TRPSI Framework.

³⁷ NIRWN (2015) 'Rural Women's [Manifesto](#): Rural Women Speak'

³⁸ NI Assembly (2014) '[Women and Public Appointments in NI](#)' [Briefing Paper]

³⁹ Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015) [Unpublished]

⁴⁰ Ibid.

In the context of Covid-19, older people are more likely to require critical care and/or die as a result of a coronavirus infection⁴¹. Rural areas typically have a population distribution skewed to older people compared to urban areas⁴². There are also more older women than men as 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 to collect shopping and medical prescriptions.

This will 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'). As labour relocates to a home working context, rural areas will suffer disproportionately from inferior access to high quality broadband⁴³. This weakness will also affect homeschooling during closures and be exacerbated by concurrent demands for limited available bandwidth (data transfer capacity) among multiple household members⁴⁴.

Throughout the EU, women are predominantly responsible for childcare⁴⁵ 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 responsibilities⁴⁶.



41 Wu, Z. and McGoogan, J.M. (2020) '[Characteristics of and Important Lessons from the Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) Outbreak in China](#)' JAMA Network, Vol. 323, pp 1239–1242.

42 Eurostat (2017) '[Eurostat. Statistics on Rural Areas in the EU](#)' Eurostat: Brussels, Belgium.

43 Commission for Rural Communities (2013) '[Rural Micro-Businesses: What Makes Some Thrive in a Challenging Economic Climate?](#)'

44 Phillipson, J., Gorton, M., Turner, R., et. al. (2020) '[The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Implications for Rural Economies](#)'

45 Erhel, C. and Guergoat-Larivière, M. (2013) '[Labour Market Regimes, Family Policies, and Women's Behavior in the EU](#)' Feminist Economics, Vol. 19, p 76–109.

46 Shortall, S. et. al. (2017) '[Women in Farming and the Agriculture Sector](#)' Scottish Government: Social Research.

Maintaining these businesses while undertaking additional COVID-19 caring roles will be a challenge. These gendered effects could mean differential access to household assets that can be used to buffer the effects of the coronavirus on firms.

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, the trajectory of rural development has changed, and so must we, in order to help rural entrepreneurs cope with economic stresses amid the pandemic. The added difficulty NI faces is that, **as a result of Brexit, we will no longer have access to EU Rural Development funding and policy development, and we have no indigenous rural development policy of our own.** This development has been halted to prioritise dealing with the pandemic but the timeline for the Protocol⁴⁷ implementation remains unchanged.

Whilst the rural voluntary, community and social enterprise (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 even more challenges⁴⁸. 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.

These demands need external support, but the VCSE sector often falls between business, charity and household policy frameworks⁴⁹.



⁴⁷ UK Government (2019) [Northern Ireland Protocol](#)

⁴⁸ Milbourne, L.; Cushman, M. (2015) '[Complying, Transforming or Resisting in the New Austerity? Realigning Social Welfare and Independent Action among English Voluntary Organisations.](#)' *Journal of Social Policy*, Vol. 44, pp 463–485.

⁴⁹ Agapitova, N.; Sanchez, B.; Tinsley, E. (2017) '[Government Support to the Social Enterprise Sector: Comparative Review of Policy Frameworks and Tools.](#)' The World Bank: Washington, DC, USA.

COVID-19 has demonstrated 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.

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, such as increasing digital identification for rural small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to allow new ways of securing collateral and credit histories. 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

Summary of 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 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 Executive work quickly on ensuring we have a future Rural Development policy that supports vibrant, gender equal, rural communities.
- * 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.



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)⁵⁰ and Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)⁵¹ guarantee the right to housing as part of the right to an adequate standard of living. This is expanded upon in the Yogyakarta Principles⁵², which covers the application of human rights law in relation to sexual and gender minorities. The Principles state:

"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."

Despite this right being comprehensively covered in human rights law, its application and interpretation on the ground 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, rather than being treated as a right. Support from the PSNI in trying to address issues such as homelessness, often attempts to address symptoms of the problem - such as mental illness and substance misuse - rather than addressing its fundamental cause.

⁵⁰ United Nations (1948) [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR), p 7.

⁵¹ United Nations (1966) [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR), p 4.

⁵² [Yogyakarta Principles](#) (2017)

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. 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, BAME 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.

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.

Summary of Recommendations:

- * In the short term, restrict home ownership to one per individual, and engage in a process of dismantling large housing monopolies and seizing empty/derelict buildings, as well as those where tenants are living in unsustainable conditions
- * 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 to the state.
- * De-commodifying the housing system in this way removes the significant rent pressures on the most vulnerable in society.
- * Pay for housing and property upkeep through taxation instead of inflated and unpredictable rent requests, which often line pockets instead of going towards upkeep
- * 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.



A Feminist Green Economy

Tackling climate change is one of the greatest challenges in society, and it is crucial that all Departments play a part in this, and for the gendered impacts to be considered. 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 agreement⁵³ must be met from a perspective that will support tackling gender inequality.

The lockdown exposed the severe impact of governmental decisions to neglect public services on our society, with many existing socio-economic inequalities being exacerbated during the lockdown. 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.



⁵³ [New Decade, New Approach Agreement](#) (2020), p.8

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 WPG endorse taking an intersectional feminist perspective⁵⁴ to a Green New Deal for Northern Ireland in relation to our economic recovery and the NI Executive's aims for tackling climate change. 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'*⁵⁵ outlines some ideas of what a Feminist Green New Deal might look like:

- *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.*

⁵⁴ Taking an intersectional feminist approach means taking into consideration the various ways in which different aspects of a woman's social identity can overlap and compound the nature and severity of gender discrimination she faces. For example, women from minority ethnic backgrounds will experience gender discrimination differently than white women; with issues of racial inequality and gender inequality overlapping and compounding one another. More information on this can be found [here](#).

⁵⁵ Cohen, M. and MacGregor, S. (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.

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 Security⁵⁶.

Summary of Recommendations:

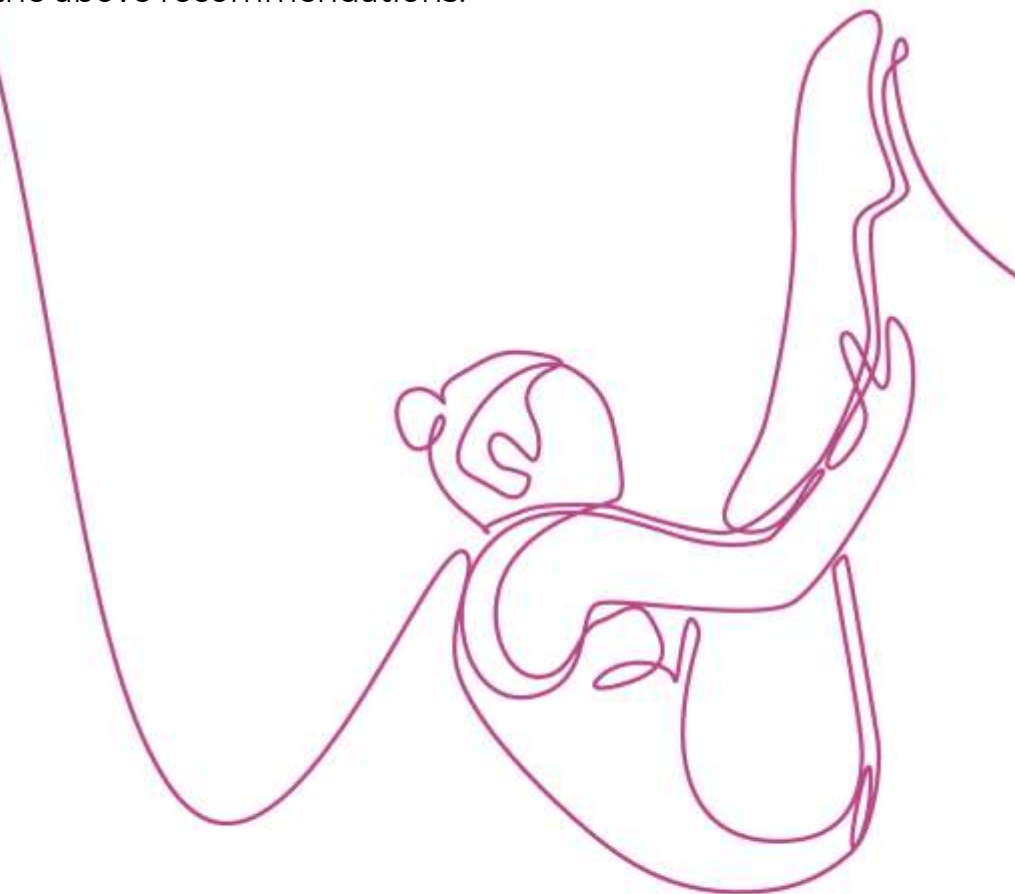
- * Co-designing social infrastructure at a local level with the needs of women taken into account,
- * Provide subsidies and other incentives, including paid education leave, to support women, particularly low-income and BAME women, in accessing training and development programmes in high-skilled work 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.
- * 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,
- * 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,
- * 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,

(continued on next page)

⁵⁶ United Nations (2000) Security Council: [Resolution 1325](#) (UNSCR 1325) Women, Peace and Security.



- * 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 NI economy each year,
- * 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.
- * Promote trade justice within supply chains and create ethical procurement guidelines in line with the above recommendations.



Health Pillar



Mental Health Concerns due to Covid-19

With the additional health complications of the pandemic, it is crucial that the Department for Communities is aware of its gendered impacts, and provides adequate levels of social support. 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. 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. For example, studies from past viral outbreaks show well-documented increases in mental health disorders as a result of 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 services⁵⁷. Women are disproportionately represented in poverty, social housing, and employment related to frontline services and care-giving.



⁵⁷ Chakraborty, N. (2020), '[The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on mental health](#)', Progress in Neurology and Psychiatry, Vol. 24 (2).

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.

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 victims of domestic and sexual violence and LGBT+ people. The lockdown has exacerbated domestic violence (“DV”) against women⁵⁸. 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 counselling. Victims of sexual violence also require appropriate therapy and counselling services.

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.

Disproportionate mental health issues within LGBT+ communities are not inevitable, and are contributed to significantly by the institutionalised issues explained above.

Mental health issues within the community are exacerbated by statutory services which fail to meet their needs including: failure to adequately fund and competently advertise sexual & reproductive health services; failure to provide transition-related-care for trans individuals; failure to fund access to IVF for lesbian and bisexual couples; failure to enforce equality legislation in schools; failure to address poverty and homelessness.

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 ways; such as depression, suicide, substance abuse, self-harm, unemployment and homelessness.

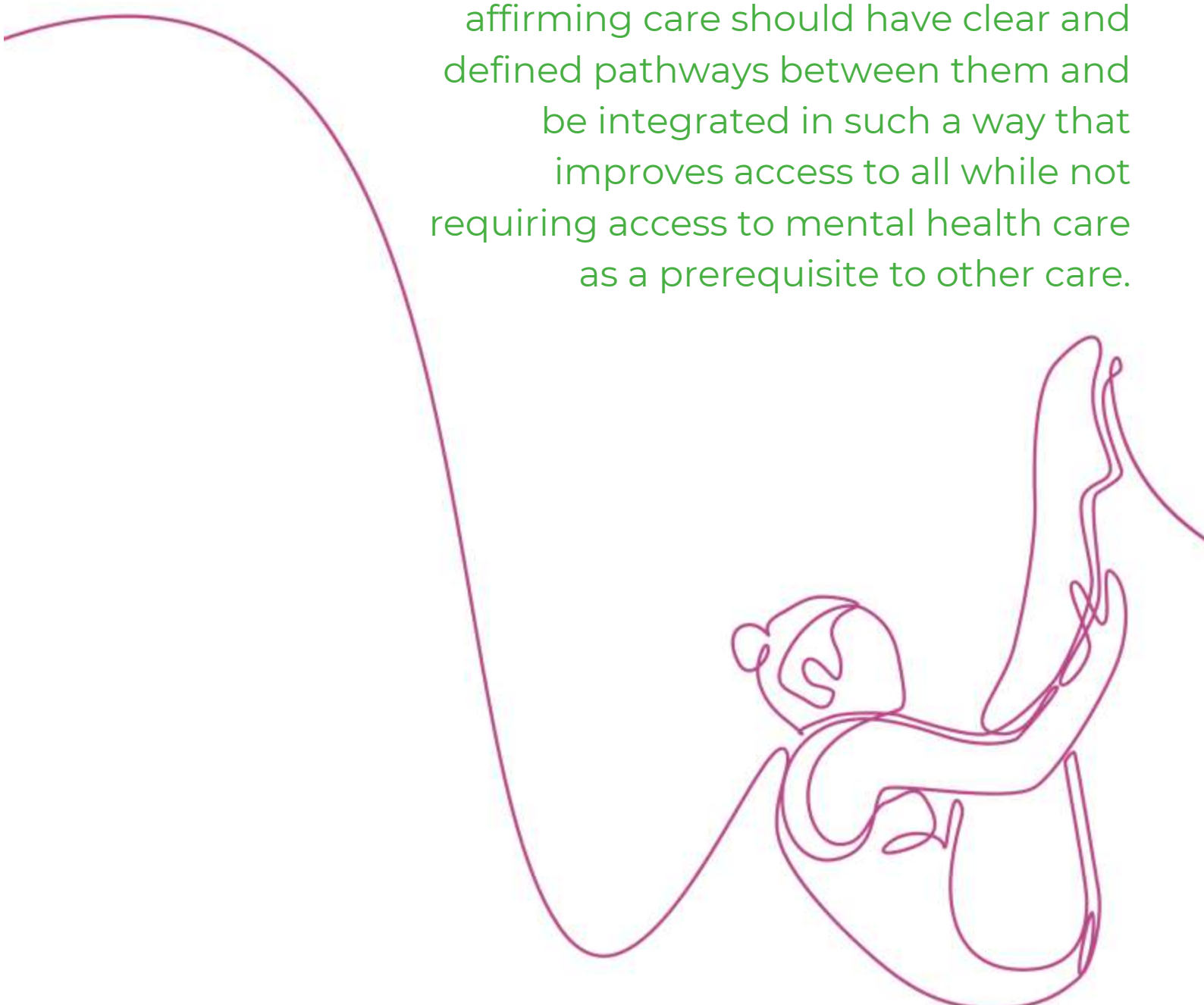


⁵⁸ McCormack, J. (April 2020) "[Coronavirus: Three domestic killings since lockdown began.](#)" BBC News.

Summary of Recommendations:

- * We recommend that specific funding is allocated for appropriate, safe and rapid therapeutic services to victims of domestic violence (DV) and sexual violence (SV).
- * 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.
- * 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.
- * Support services for victims of DV/ SV 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.
- * Improving access to culturally competent sexual health services (reducing STI/HIV anxiety),
- * De-commodifying 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.
- * 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 marginalised women.
- * 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).

LGBT+ support 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.



Women with Caring Responsibilities & 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 includes⁵⁹:

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

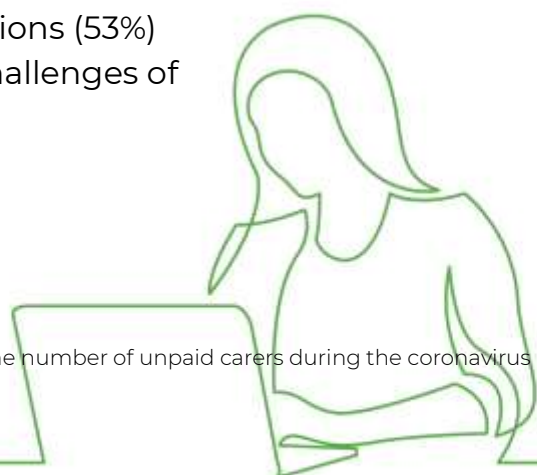
These results closely matched what the public, who had never been unpaid carers, thought the challenges that unpaid carers face were:

- 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%).

⁵⁹ 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, p.7.



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 year⁶⁰. The needs of carers' health should be a priority in any recovery planning in Northern Ireland.

⁶⁰ Carers NI (2015), '[NI Carers save government £4.6 billion a year](#)'; see also: Carers NI (2017) '[State of Caring 2017](#)'

Summary of Recommendations:

These recommendations are taken from the gender segregated labour markets and care work section, but are also relevant for this section.

- * Analyse the economic value of putting money into caring, which will help carers get back into paid employment and thus improve their health and financial wellbeing and consequently reduce pressure on the health and benefits systems in the long-run.
- * For a better, more resilient economy, care work must be recognised as a valued job. This means making sure it pays well, attracts investment in education and training, and provides opportunities for promotion.
- * Design a sustainable and stable social care system which is free to the point of use for all citizens, with well paid, well trained permanent staff and funded via general taxation.
- * Introduce policies to encourage sharing of care and unpaid work between women and men.
- * Provide better information and advice for carers, forward planning, and support so that there is a reliable and sustainable care economy which is fit for purpose.
- * 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.
- * Significant increase in funding for the health and social care system to allow services to rebuild after the crisis, alongside bringing forward plans for long-term reform of social 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.
- * 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.
- * Schools, colleges and universities should be encouraged to introduce policies and programmes that support carers and improve their experience of education.

Health Impacts of Austerity on Women

As stated earlier in this report, 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...and increased levels of material deprivation. These factors can impact negatives on health and wellbeing in the absence of strong support systems.’⁶¹



⁶¹ British Medical Association (BMA) (2016), '[Health in all policies: health, austerity and welfare reform: A briefing from the board of science](#)', British Medical Association.

Evidence from countries such as Iceland, Sweden, Canada and Norway⁶² 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. 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.

Summary of Recommendations:

- * 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.



⁶² Ibid. p 19.

Abortion, Maternal Health and Bodily Autonomy

We acknowledge that the issues and recommendations contained in this section are primarily the responsibility of the Department of Health and The Executive Office. However, it is crucial that the Department for Communities supports the implementation of these recommendations and recognises abortion and maternal health as a gender equality issue. 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 access⁶³.

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 abortion⁶⁴. 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 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.⁶⁵



⁶³ Centre for Reproductive Rights (2020) '[Breaking Ground: Treaty Monitoring Bodies on Reproductive Rights](#)' pp 12-14.

⁶⁴ Todd-Gher, J. and Shah, P. K. (2020) '[Abortion in the context of COVID-19: A Human Rights Imperative](#)'

⁶⁵ For details on the best provision for NI, see the [WPG response to the NIO Abortion Framework Consultation](#).

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,⁶⁶ therefore they should be able to fully access healthcare at home during this global pandemic.⁶⁷

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.

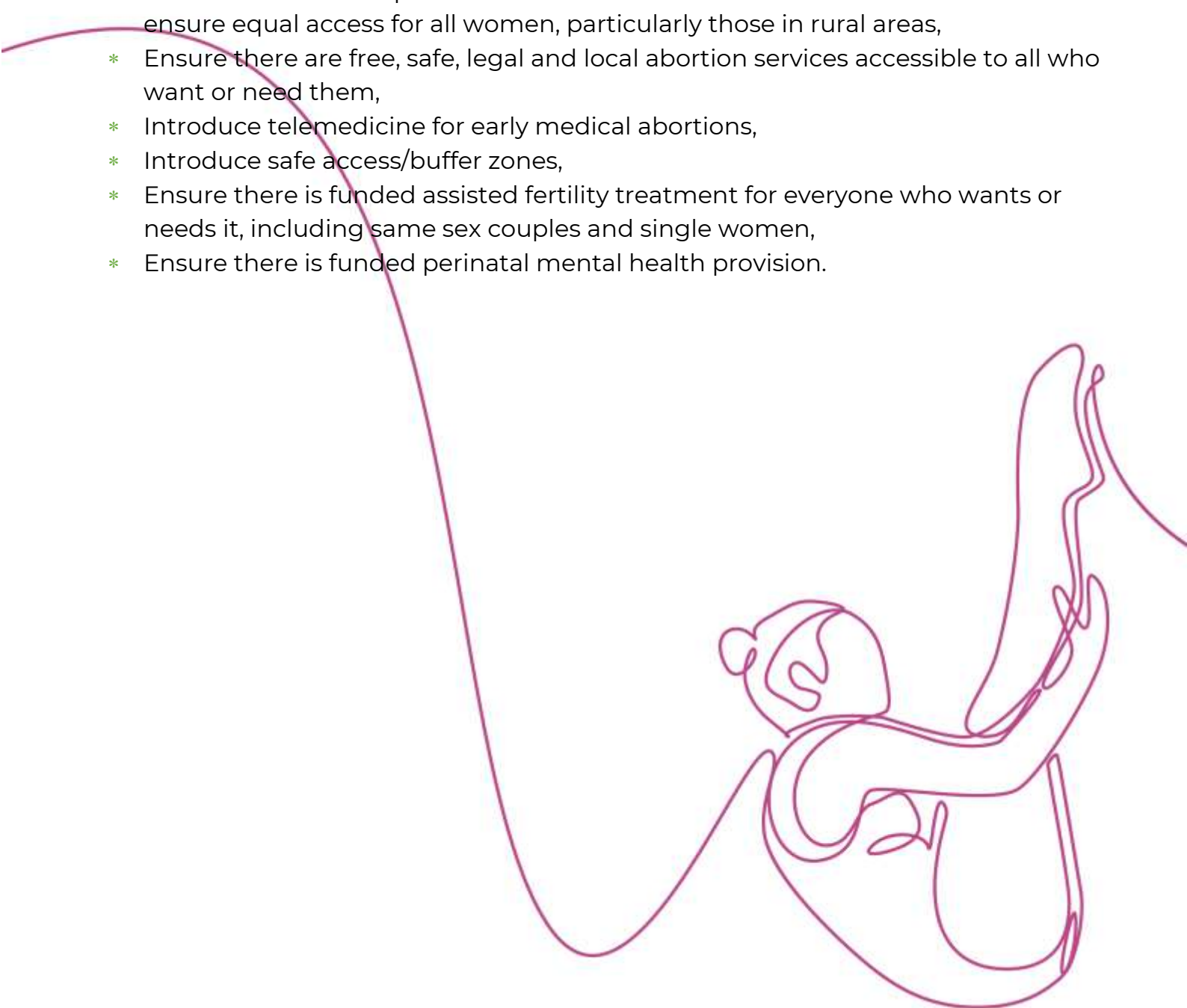
Other areas of reproductive healthcare, including access to fertility treatments for lesbian and bisexual women, as well as access to timely and human rights compliant gender affirming care, are not currently guaranteed by the Department of Health and are often held behind long waiting lists and/or gatekeeping. 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.

⁶⁶ For more information on the heavy financial, emotional and logistical burden of travelling to GB on women, see [CEDAW Committee comments](#) (2018)

⁶⁷ World Health Organisation (2019) '[Self Care Interventions](#)' [Recommended Guidelines]

Summary of Recommendations:

- * 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,
- * 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.



Trans Healthcare

We recognise that trans healthcare is primarily the responsibility of the Department of Health and Department of Finance. However, it has been included in this report due to the Department for Communities' role in delivering the Gender Equality Strategy and LGBTQI+ strategy.

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 have so far been waiting up to 3 years and 8 months for a first appointment.**⁶⁸ 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. Individuals who are denied care due to long waiting lists are highly likely to access care in the private sector, at high cost. This is particularly difficult for individuals requiring testosterone, which is a controlled substance.

⁶⁸ BHSCT FoI Request, June 2020 [Unpublished]

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. As trans communities are more likely to experience poverty, this has

disproportionate effects on housing security, health and quality of life.

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.

Summary of 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.

Disabled Women

Although primarily the responsibility of the Department of Health, this section has been included as it is of relevance to the Department for Communities in relation to the Gender Equality Strategy, Disability Strategy and ongoing Second Independent Review of Personal Independence Payments (PIP).

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 under-employment.

Disabled women earn **22.1% less** than non-disabled men, and 11.8% less than disabled men

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.⁶⁹



⁶⁹ Women's Budget Group (2018) '[Disabled Women and Austerity](#)'

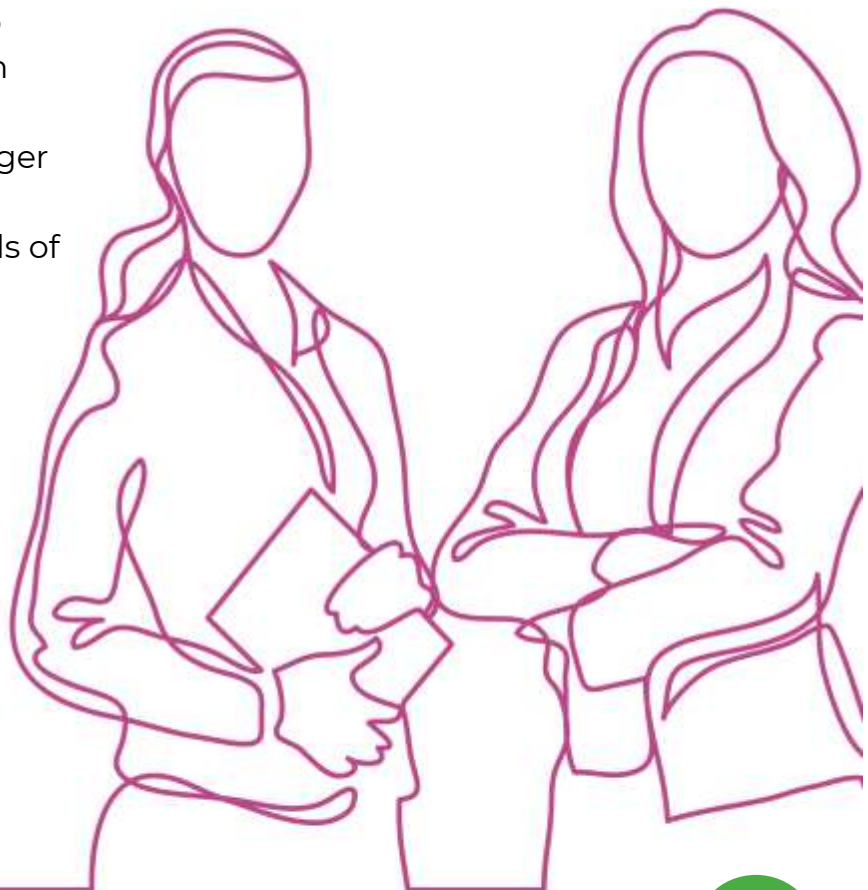
Summary of Recommendations:

- * 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
- * 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.
- * NI Assembly and local councils should 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 for much longer than the general public.
- * Creation of 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.

(continued on next page)



- * 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.
- * 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,
- * PPE must continue to be made available to all disabled people who have PAs/carers working in their homes, particularly ahead of any potential second wave,
- * Ongoing 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,
- * Ensure all disabled women's rights are upheld and protected throughout the entirety and recovery of COVID-19,
- * 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.



Social Justice Pillar



Racial Justice

The WPG stands in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. 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) 2020⁷⁰ 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. Since the protest, the PSNI's actions have been described as both discriminatory⁷¹ and unlawful⁷². As noted in the Policing Board Report, which reviewed the PSNI's response to the BLM protest:

“The approach sent the wrong message to protesters and damaged the reputation of the PSNI and the confidence of some members of the public. Whatever the rights and wrongs of going ahead with the protests and the difficulty of social distancing given the transmission rates for the virus at the time, this approach was not lawful⁷³”



⁷⁰ Department of Health (2020) 'The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) ([Amendment No. 5](#)) Regulations'

⁷¹ Young, D. (2020) "[Policing of Black Lives Matter Protests was Discriminatory – Ombudsman](#)" Belfast Telegraph [article]

⁷² Northern Ireland Policing Board (2020) '[Report](#) on the Thematic Review of the Policing Response to COVID-19'

⁷³ Ibid. p 51.

The New Decade New Approach Agreement⁷⁴ made a commitment to create a Racial Equality Strategy as part of the Programme for Government. The development and implementation of this Strategy is more important than ever, with racism being an issue that has become increasingly prevalent in Northern Ireland in recent years. In 2016-17, statistics show that racially motivated hate crime overtook sectarian hate crimes⁷⁵ for the first time in the history of Northern Ireland. More recently, the PSNI recorded 936 racist incidents including 626 racist crimes⁷⁶ 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 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.



⁷⁴ [New Decade New Approach Agreement](#) (2020), p. 27.

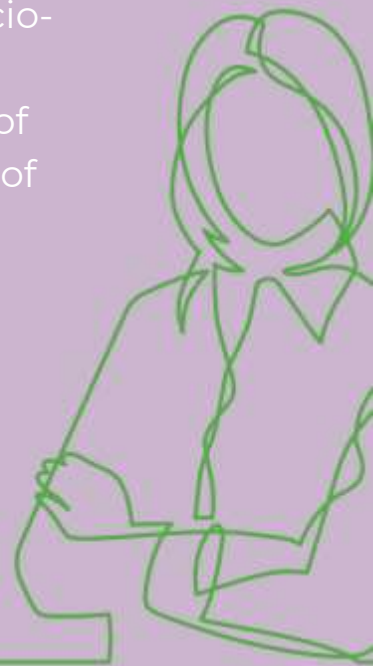
⁷⁵ PSNI (2018) “[Trends in Hate Motivated Incidents and Crimes Recorded](#) by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2017/18” p.6

⁷⁶ PSNI (2020) “[Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation](#) Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland” p.4

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.

In the context of COVID-19, evidence suggests that the pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on ethnic minority 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 this⁷⁷:

- * 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 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 on ethnic minority communities.



⁷⁷ NHS Confederation (2020) [BME Leadership Network Member Briefing](#)

Research from the WBG, LSE, Queen Mary University of London and the Fawcett Society has also produced significant evidence on ethnic minority women and the impact of COVID-19⁷⁸:

- 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.
- 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).
- 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.
- 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.
- 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%).
- Only 47.4% of people of colour said there were people outside of their household who they could rely on for help, compared with 57.2% of white people.

⁷⁸ WBG et. al. (2020), [‘BAME women and COVID-19 - Research Evidence’](#)

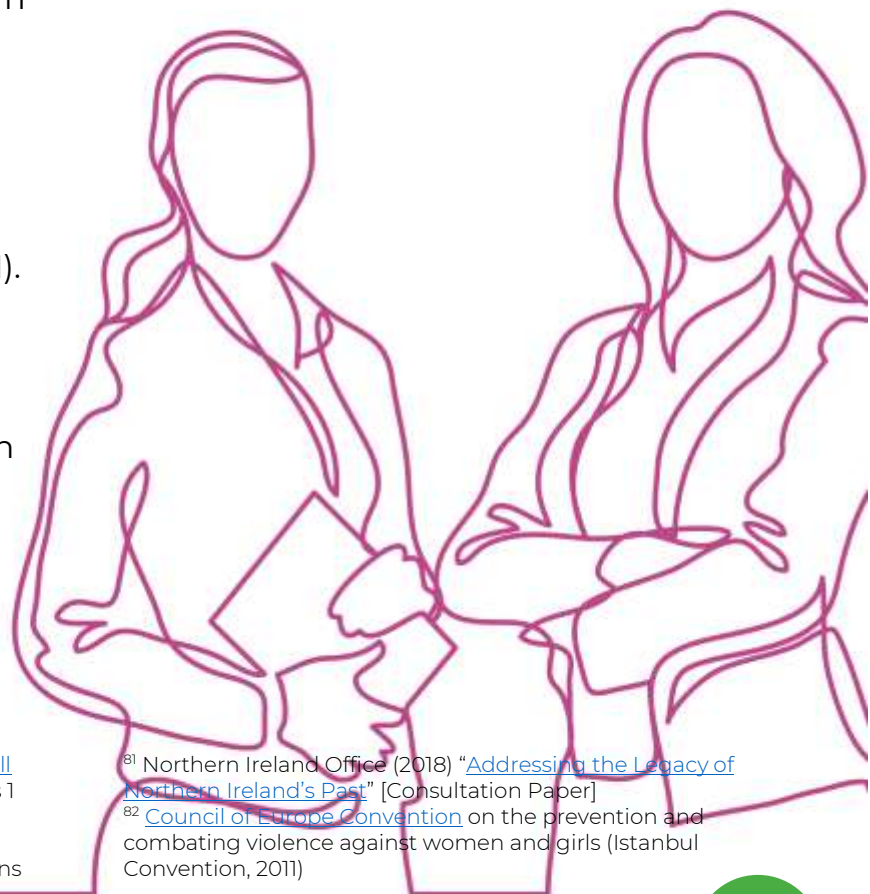
Summary of Recommendations:

- * 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.
- * 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.
- * 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.
- * 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.
- * 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.

Politics, Public Life, Peacebuilding & Decision Making

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 CEDAW⁷⁹ Committee called for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in Northern Ireland⁸⁰, as has the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women. A consultation on legacy issues⁸¹ (2018) acknowledged that a *'disproportionate number of survivors and family members are women'* (p. 21). Despite this, there has been little progress on increasing women's participation in securing peace or in post conflict reconstruction in Northern Ireland.

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 women⁸² found that many feel disempowered, have difficulty circumnavigating community gatekeepers (including paramilitary groups) and fear harm if they were to speak out.



⁷⁹ United Nations (1979) [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW), Articles 1 and 2. The UK signed the Convention in 1981 and ratified in 1986.

⁸⁰ Concluding Observations [2019](#), 2013, 2008 on examinations of the UK under CEDAW

⁸¹ Northern Ireland Office (2018) ["Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland's Past"](#) [Consultation Paper]

⁸² [Council of Europe Convention](#) on the prevention and combating violence against women and girls (Istanbul Convention, 2011)

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. 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 Inquiry by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on UNSCR 1325 Women, Peace and Security (2014); and repeated CEDAW Committee Concluding Observations, 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.



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 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 de-prioritised 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.

The below statistics from the NI Assembly Research and Information Service shine a light on the vast gender segregation and disparities across the public sector in January of 2020¹:

- 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.

The WPG welcomes the Minister for Department for Communities' commitment to take forward the following social inclusion strategies on; gender, anti-poverty, sexual orientation, and disability⁸³, and we note that progress is already underway regarding these. However, these commitments must continue to be met, as **civil society and women more generally have been calling for the implementation of many of these strategies for more than a decade:**

- Economic/Industrial strategy;
- Investment Strategy;
- Energy Strategy;
- Racial Equality 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. 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'⁸⁴, which were developed in 2015 by a multi-disciplinary group of human rights experts and academics, could assist in achieving this.

⁸³ Department for Communities (2020) '[Announcement on social inclusion strategies](#)'

⁸⁴ O'Rourke, C. (2015), '[Gender Principles for Dealing with the Legacy of the Past](#)', Transitional Justice Institute.

Summary of Recommendations:

- * 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;
 - Online abuse of women political and public representatives;
 - 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;
 - The rule obliging political candidates to publish their home addresses for elections which threatens the personal safety of Domestic and Sexual Abuse survivors.

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 wellbeing⁸⁵.

⁸⁵ See the [Participation and Practice of Rights \(PPR\) campaign](#) 'Internet Access for All' with 670 signatures [as of 07.01.21]



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. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the potential of technology in connecting people and also in providing support services, and these advantages should be shared out among all of society.



Summary of Recommendations:

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



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 1971⁸⁶ 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 dependents, without recourse to public funds⁸⁷. This is known as 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF). Since 2012, a 'NRPF condition' has been imposed on nearly all migrants granted the right to live or work in the UK. This means the person holding leave is permitted to work in the UK and pays taxes, but is prohibited from accessing the public funds paid for by those very taxes. Breaching a NRPF condition can result in a criminal conviction, can negatively impact future immigration status; and applying to have NRPF lifted can result in a visa renewal period being changed to a ten-year route.

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. 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. 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.

⁸⁶ UK Government (1971) [Immigration Act](#) [legislation]

⁸⁷ Ibid. The definition of 'public funds' in Paragraph 6 of the Immigration Rules 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 NRPF policy disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups such as single parent households, pregnant women and people subject to domestic violence. The impact of this policy was exacerbated during the coronavirus crisis, as job losses and economic uncertainty left people subject to NRPF unable to access support.

In Northern Ireland, the Covid-19 Discretionary Support (Amendment) Regulations created a Discretionary Support Grant to urgently support those affected by the Coronavirus crisis. However, these grants are listed as a public fund in Paragraph 6 of the Immigration rules, excluding persons subject to NRPF from accessing them.

Summary of 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.



Cultural Pillar



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

Sexism and the sexist portrayal of women and girls in the media remains a serious issue in Northern Ireland. 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”⁸⁸.

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.



⁸⁸ Girlguiding UK (2019), [‘Girls’ attitudes survey’](#)

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 rise⁸⁹ 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 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. 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 violence⁹⁰. While they were successful, there are still numerous instances of this occurring in the media and guidelines therefore need to be enforced more stringently.

Rape Myths and Rape Culture

The WPG welcome the publication of the Gillen Review Implementation Plan in June 2020. Many of the changes recommended in the Gillen Review 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. 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. According to the Implementation plan⁹¹, this will not be carried out until 2022.

⁸⁹ Marsh, S. (2019) "[Hospital admissions for eating disorders surge to highest in eight years](#)" The Guardian [article]

⁹⁰ Petter, O. (2019) "[Feminist Group Wins Campaign to Change how Media Reports Domestic Abuse](#)" The Independent [article]

⁹¹ Northern Ireland Department of Justice (2020) Gillen Review: [Implementation Plan](#).

Before then, a public awareness campaign should 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. Sex and relationships education is currently dependent on individual schools who can choose who to invite to cover the topic and can do so in a way that does not effectively deal with these issues. 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.

The Gillen Review Report contains over 200 recommendations that are wide-ranging and overwhelmingly welcomed by the women's movement in Northern Ireland. One of its 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 myths⁹². 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."

⁹² Northern Ireland Department of Justice (2019) [Gillen Review](#).

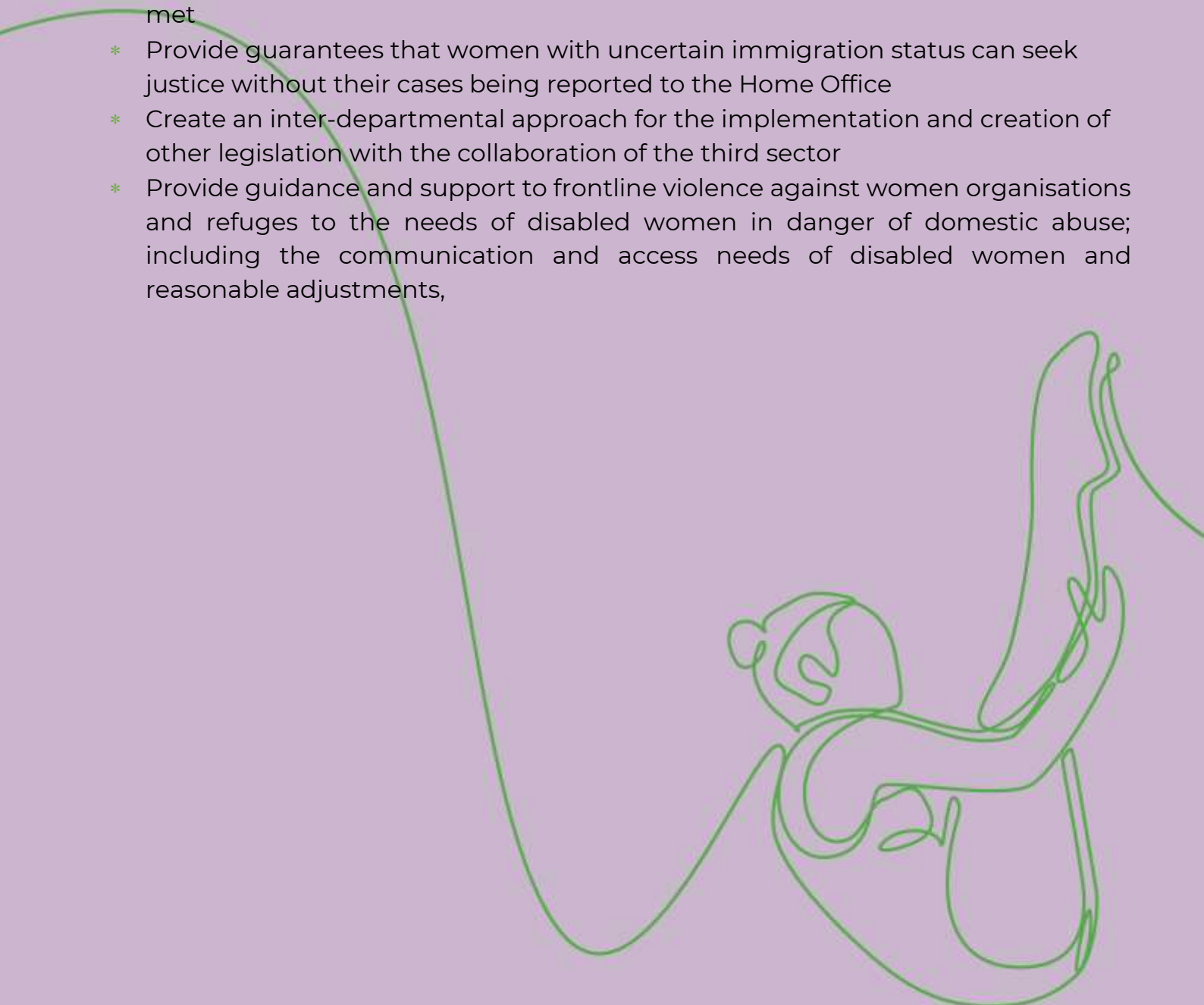
Summary of Recommendations:

- * Beginning a public awareness campaign as soon as possible on the importance of responsible reporting on sexual offences, including an awareness campaign targeted at formal education 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.
- * A comprehensive, inclusive programme is developed on sex and relationships education, for all schools and third level institutions.
- * 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 Convention⁹³.
- * Ensure that programmes and policies dealing with the elimination of exploitation, violence and abuse contain specific actions for disabled women.
- * 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.
- * 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.,
- * 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.

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⁹³ Council of Europe (2011) [Istanbul Convention](#)

- * 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),
- * 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
- * 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
- * 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,



Hate Crimes and Online Abuse

We recognise that hate crime and online abuse are issues which are primarily the responsibility of the Department of Justice. However, the Department for Communities should be aware of these issues and our recommendations, given the need for wide societal change and the need for increased funding for community organisations who provide support to victims.

With the recent publication of Judge Marrinan's Northern Ireland Hate Crime Review⁹⁴, 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 women and minority groups. While the WPG welcomes gender being recognised as a protected characteristic in Hate Crime legislation, it will continue to call for; misogyny and transphobia to be added as hate crime characteristics; legislation to account for intersecting identities; the 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.

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 harassment⁹⁵.

⁹⁴ Judge Marrinan (2020) '[Hate Crime Legislation in Northern Ireland: Independent Review](#)'

⁹⁵ ITV News (2018) '[Reports of Online Violence Towards Women in NI](#)' [article]

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.”⁹⁶ 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.”

Public figures, MPs and journalists are often particular targets of online abuse, 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](#).

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 in politics are heard. Online abuse of some of Northern Ireland’s female politicians has prompted calls to establish a cross-party working group on misogyny.

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.**



⁹⁶ Sir Tim Berners-Lee (2020) “[Why the web needs to work for women and girls](#)” Web Foundation.

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.

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Introduce 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,
- * 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,

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- * 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,
- * Commission extensive research specific to Northern Ireland to tackle the under-reporting of hate crime and mistrust from minorities in reporting services,
- * Restrict the press reporting of hate crime victims where appropriate,
- * Create measures for legislative consolidations and scrutiny.



Education and Training

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, 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 ethnic minority students, 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 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.

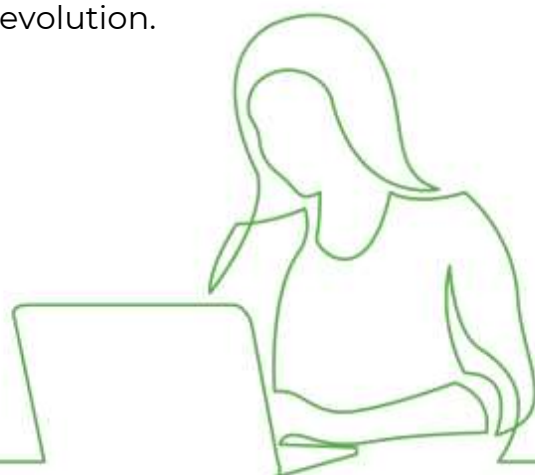
Effective teaching of equality and diversity often relies on there being committed teachers within schools who are willing to look for opportunities to explore these themes fully. Sometimes this involves signing up for optional initiatives such as Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning that have 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. 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 past year.

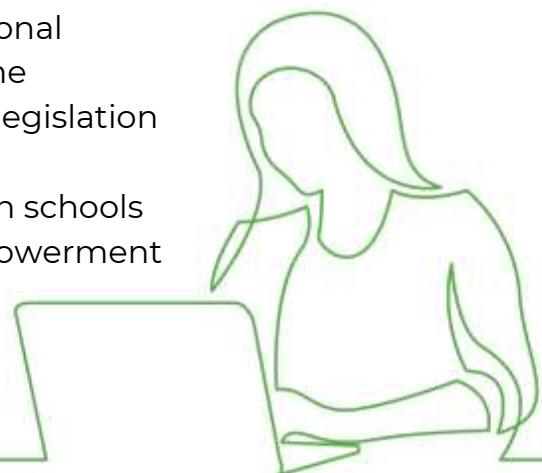
COVID-19 has led to huge disruptions to the lives of women, as schools closed and many women faced having to balance home-schooling, childcare, work from home and their own educational needs. The information on the unequal distribution of care and gender equality gaps that remain in the UK highlight 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 home-schooling, **rural access poverty**, limited support for parents with **disabled children** and more is needed.

Summary of Recommendations:

- * An increased focus on equality and diversity should be introduced into the curriculum when it is next updated.
- * Section 75 requirements and the Sex Discrimination (gender re-assignment) Regulations (1999) 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.
- * 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.
- * 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 CEDAW.



International Best Practice



The Purple Pact: Economics that Work for Women

The European Women's Lobby (EWL) proposals for COVID-19 recovery draw from The Purple Pact⁹⁷, 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.



⁹⁷ European Women's Lobby (2020) '[The Purple Pact](#): A Feminist Approach to the Economy'

The key issues highlighted include:

1

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.

2

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.

3

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.

Summary of Recommendations:

- * 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.



Initiatives at UN Level

The UN Global Compact⁹⁸ 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 better⁹⁹. These include a brief on gender equality¹⁰⁰, which emphasises the critical role women play in sustainable and resilient economies,

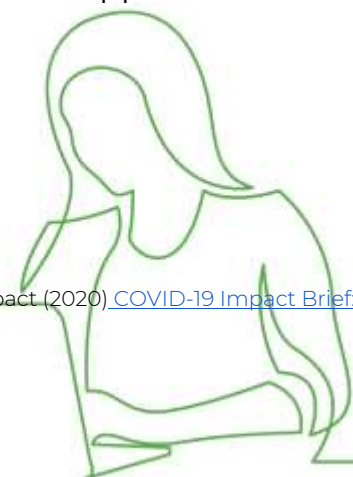
while highlighting the specific gendered issues and risks that the pandemic has underlined. The brief also provides access to resources developed within the UN, including gender impact assessment tools and checklists for gender responsive recovery. **Actions recommended by the Compact in this brief include:**

- 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.

⁹⁸ [UN Global Impact](#) Support for Businesses Resource [Website]

⁹⁹ UN Global Impact (2020) [20th Anniversary Campaign](#) [Website]

¹⁰⁰ UN Global Compact (2020) [COVID-19 Impact Brief: Gender Equality](#) [Website]



UN Women has been very active in developing guidance for stakeholders on how gender equality can be effectively integrated in COVID-19 response and recovery, and have highlighted the need for action to protect women and girls from gender-based violence. The key actions set out for governments include; ensuring

appropriate resourcing for organisations supporting victims and survivors of gender-based and domestic violence, and ensuring women are at the centre of policy change, response and recovery.

A critical element needed is sex-disaggregated data to fully understand the impact of COVID-19 on women, domestic violence and also on the economic activities of women.

Summary of 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.



Conclusion

The 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 provides significant evidence under the multiple pillars, including:

1. Economic Justice Pillar
2. Health Pillar
3. Social Justice Pillar
4. Cultural Pillar
5. Brexit and a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland
6. International Best Practice

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.

Further Information

The evidence and recommendations included in this report are department-specific and have been specifically developed for the Department for Communities. The full WPG Feminist Recovery Plan can be accessed [here](#), which includes more detail on the issues raised in this report and further recommendations for other NI departments, the NI Executive and the UK Government.

*For questions or queries regarding the WPG
Feminist Recovery Plan, please contact:*

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Snapshot

Although the Feminist Recovery Plan was published in July 2020, as of February 2021, the majority of issues highlighted in the Plan are yet to be addressed. This is extremely concerning to the Women's Policy Group, as **many of the issues raised are time-sensitive and require urgent attention**. As a matter of urgency, the Department should:

- * Scrap the Benefit Cap and 2 child limit on Universal Credit and Tax Credits
- * Extend/make permanent the £20/week uplift to Universal Credit/Tax Credits
- * Close the existing loopholes in the Benefit Cap and Bedroom Tax mitigations
- * Extend the mitigations package for NI
- * Make more payments as grants rather than loans
- * Increase the level of Carer's Allowance
- * Increase the level of Child Benefit per child/ week
- * Increase the budget for Discretionary Support, remove the income ceiling & extend eligibility criteria
- * Increase the budget for the Universal Credit Contingency Fund and end the 5 week wait