



Women's
Policy Group NI

NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan

Recommendations:

Department for Infrastructure

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Abstract

This report contains evidence and recommendations specific to the Department for Infrastructure; 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, as well as the pre-existing inequalities which have worsened as a result of its impact 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 Infrastructure 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 an inter-departmental approach is essential to effectively tackling them.



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. The plan uses 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:

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

The content of this 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



Rural Women

Gender inequality is amplified for women in rural areas due to Access Poverty.¹ 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 areas.² Women in NI remain under-represented in public and political life³ 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 funding.⁴ 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 groups.⁵ 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 proposed future budgets, the Programme for Government and policy recovery planning is assessed for rural impacts 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.

Despite making up 40% of all women in Northern Ireland, rural women receive just 1.3% of all government funding set aside for women.



¹ DAERA (2016) Public [Consultation](#) on TRPSI Framework

² NIRWN (2015) 'Rural Women's [Manifesto](#): Rural Women Speak'

³ NI Assembly (2014) [Briefing Paper](#) 'Women and Public Appointments in NI'

⁴ Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015) [Unpublished]

⁵ Ibid.

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Investment in accessible and affordable public transport for those living in rural areas.
- * 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.

A Feminist Green Economy

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 agreement⁶ 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.

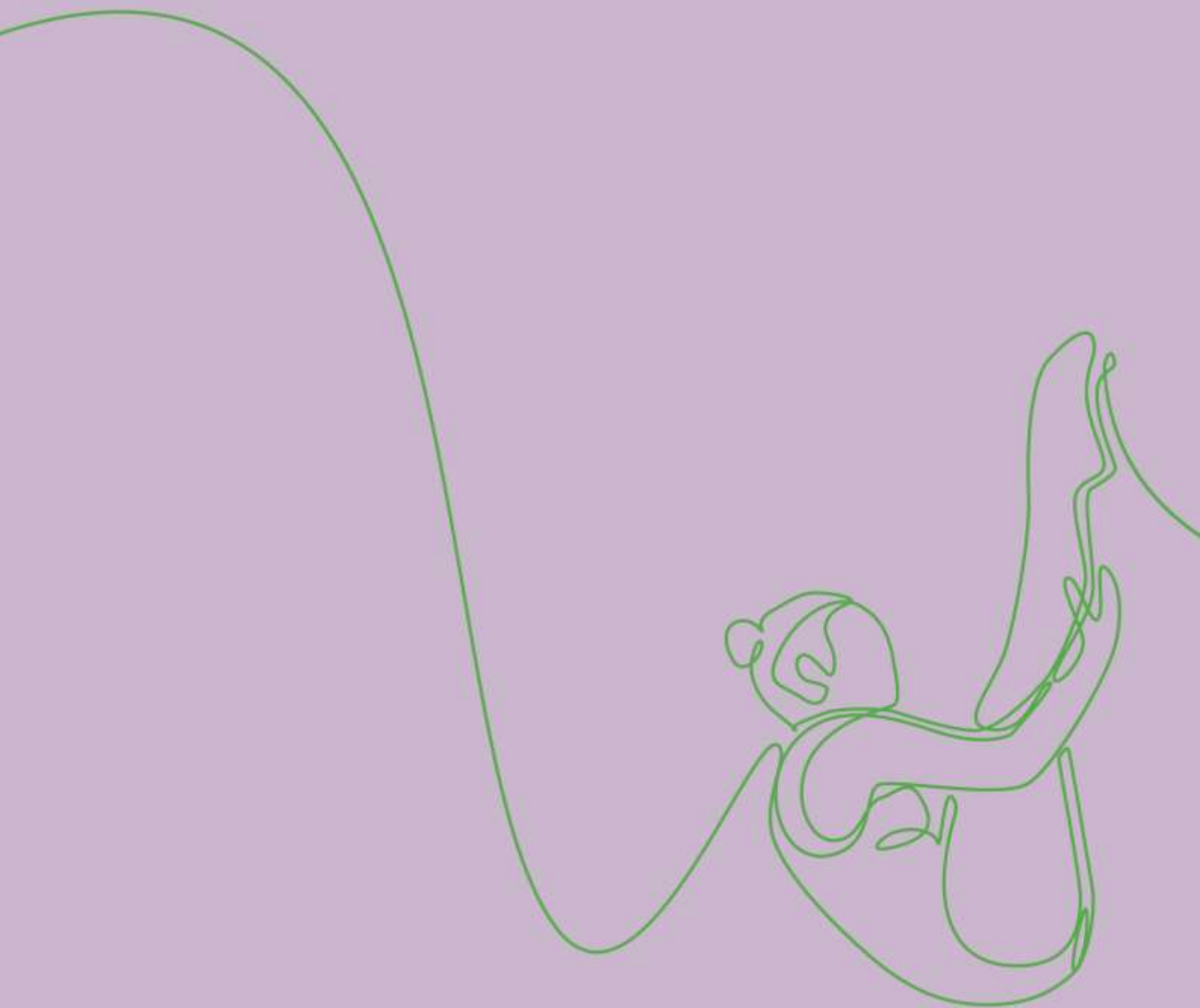
Now, more than ever, it is necessary to reassess our economic decision making and recent history of severely under-resourced public goods. Northern Ireland would not have been able to cope without those working in the areas above, and it is necessary to recognise this undervalued work; redistribute care responsibilities and reduce the levels of harm to our social, health, economic and environmental infrastructures.



⁶ [New Decade, New Approach Agreement](#) (2020), p.8

Summary of Recommendations:

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



The following sections from the Economic Justice Pillar have been included in this report as the WPG is calling for these issues to be regarded by all Departments as a part of essential infrastructure; and should therefore be brought to the attention of the Department for Infrastructure.

Gender Segregated Labour Markets and 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 2020 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.”⁷

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 year;⁸ whilst unpaid carers across all the UK provide social care worth £57 billion per year.⁹



⁷ World Economic Forum (2020) 'Mind the 100 Year Gap', [Global Gender Gap Report 2020](#), p.33.

⁸ Carers NI (2015), '[NI Carers save government £4.6 billion a year](#)'; see also: Carers NI (2017) '[State of Caring 2017](#)'

⁹ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2017), '[Unpaid carers provide social care worth £57 billion](#)'

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.

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 work.¹⁰ 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.
- * Require all workplaces to record and publish gender segregation and gender pay data.
- * 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.

(continued on next page)

¹⁰ Castellane, R. et. al. (2019), '[Analyzing the gender gap in European labour markets at the NUTS-1 level](#)', Cogent Social Sciences, Vol 5 (1).



- * 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.



Childcare

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

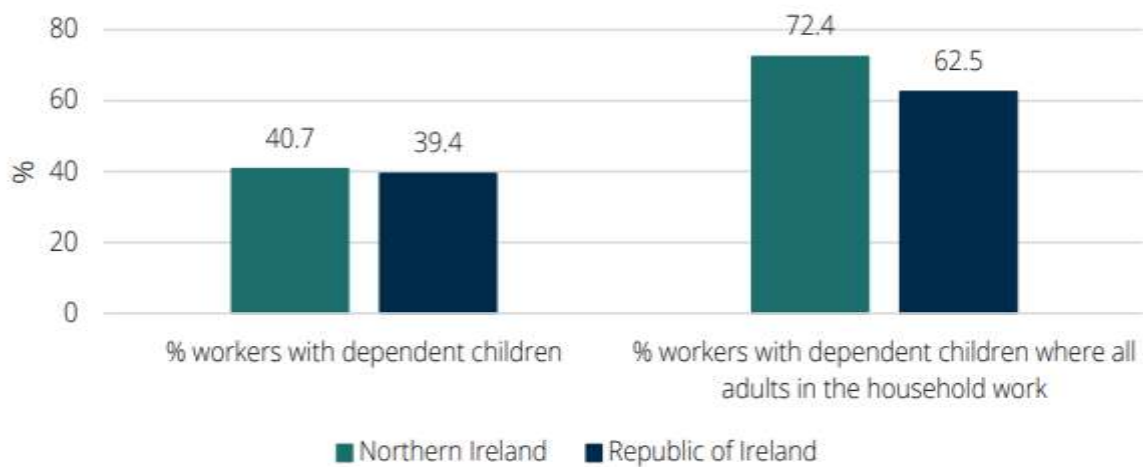
Women are more likely to be forced to care for children, either in addition to their work, or instead of paid work. This applies particularly to parents of disabled children, as childcare options are extremely limited even in ordinary circumstances. This increases the risk of poverty and is also likely to have health impacts for parents. 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 this.¹¹

¹¹ See Childcare for All Campaign Statements on Childcare and COVID-19 ([June 2020](#)); and ([May 2020](#)).

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 employed.¹² 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 limited.**¹³ 47% of families in Northern Ireland rely on support from other family members for childcare to enable them to access the workforce.¹⁴ 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.*

¹² 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].

¹³ Dr. Lisa Wilson (2020), '[Employment and access to childcare during the Covid-19 crisis](#)', Nevin Economic Research Institute, p.3.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.5.

Research from the Fawcett Society, UK Women's Budget Group and academics also suggests that half of parents with young children are struggling to make ends meet, and women key workers face significantly more anxiety and under pressure to work.¹⁵ The lack of an adequate childcare provision in Northern Ireland, as we move further out of lockdown, 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. These barriers are exacerbated by the rising cost of childcare provision in Northern Ireland.

Research from the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey in 2019¹⁶ 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) report¹⁷ 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.'¹⁸



¹⁵ UK Women's Budget Group (WBG) et. al., (2020), '[Half of parents with young children struggling to make ends meet](#)', UK WBG, Fawcett Society, QMUS and LSE.

¹⁶ Employers for Childcare (2019) '[Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019](#)'

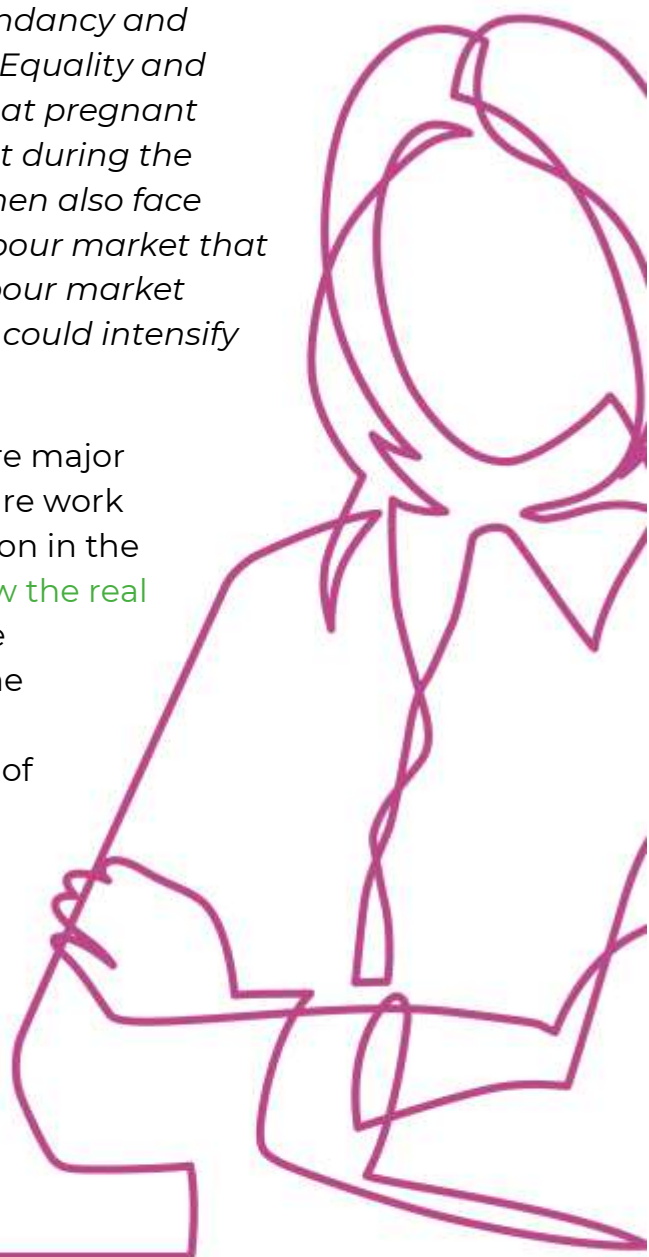
¹⁷ TUC (2020), '[Forced out: The cost of getting childcare wrong](#)'

¹⁸ 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 mums have increased earnings compared to 26% of dads.¹⁹ 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 fathers.²⁰ Furthermore, 87% of men in paid work were full-time workers compared to 59% of women.²¹ *Since the crisis began, mums have been 1.5 times more likely than dads to have quit or lost their job or been furloughed.*²²

In particular, we would like to reference TUC concerns²³ 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 [...]"*

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.



¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ ONS (2019) "[Families and the Labour Market](#)," p.6.

²² Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) (2020) "[How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?](#)"

²³ Ibid. 17., p.4.

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.

Social Justice Pillar



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, and the structures, policies and guidance contained in the agenda should be applied to the COVID-19 response in Northern Ireland.

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.

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. 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.

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Ensure women's groups are adequately represented in all departmental COVID-19 recovery planning procedures.
- * Ensure the women's sector is consulted with and included in the co-design of all departmental strategies and the Programme for Government.

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 Infrastructure. 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. **It is crucial that the Department for Infrastructure works with other NI Departments to tackle the issues raised in this report.** As a matter of urgency, the Department should:

- * Invest in accessible and affordable public transport for those living in rural areas.
- * Co-design social infrastructure at a local level with the needs of women taken into account.
- * Take into consideration the gendered impact of all decision-making relating to COVID-19 recovery planning, and work with the women's sector to develop ways to mitigate against any adverse impacts.
- * Meaningfully engage with women's sector organisations in the development of future policies and the Programme for Government.