



**Women's**  
**Policy Group NI**

# NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan

Recommendations:

Department of Education

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# Abstract

This report contains evidence and recommendations specific to the Department of Education, 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 girls in Northern Ireland and sets out recommendations for action. For example, issues will be addressed such as childcare, school curriculums and education campaigns.

Some of the recommendations in this summary will also be relevant for other NI Departments, as well as the UK Government. Although the Department of Education 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 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. 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)  
Siobhán Harding (Women's Support Network)  
Alexa Moore (Transgender NI)  
Robyn Scott (Committee on the Administration of Justice)  
Eliza Browning (Committee on the Administration of Justice)  
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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



## 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. Furthermore, 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.

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 (including childcare), and 69% of carers are women. Research from Carers NI shows that **Northern Ireland's carers save the economy £4.6 billion per year;**<sup>1</sup> whilst unpaid carers across all the UK provide social care worth £57 billion per year.<sup>2</sup> A recent ICTU report on Childcare explains that:

“There is consistent evidence that becoming a mother is the most important factor in explaining gender inequalities in the labour market. Women with children are much less likely to participate in the labour market, and when they do, they are more likely to work in insecure and part-time positions. In addition to this, the pay penalty for motherhood is large, and parental leave entitlements are skewed towards mothers staying at home.”



<sup>1</sup> Carers NI (2015), '[NI Carers save government £4.6 billion a year](#)'; see also: Carers NI (2017) '[State of Caring 2017](#)'

<sup>2</sup> Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2017), '[Unpaid carers provide social care worth £57 billion](#)'

**Table 3: Percentage difference in nature of labour force participation between male and female, with and without dependent children, 2018**

		S-E FT %	S-E PT %	Perm FT %	Perm PT %	Temp FT %	Temp PT %
All	Male	17.5	1.6	<b>70.5</b>	16.7	2.6	2.2
	Female	4.9	3.7	<b>54</b>	29.8	3.5	4.1
0 children	Male	17.1	1.3	<b>71.3</b>	5.2	2.7	2.3
	Female	4.9	2.3	<b>60.5</b>	24.2	4.6	3.6
1+ children	Male	18.2	2.1	<b>69.2</b>	6	2.4	2.1
	Female	4.9	5.6	<b>45.1</b>	37.6	2	4.8

Source: ICTU (2020) 'Childcare in Northern Ireland' (p 10)

This illustrates how unequal gender differentials, in regard to unpaid care work in Northern Ireland, has significant implications for achieving gender equality in labour markets. 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 care workers are 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<sup>3</sup>. For example, introduce family policies, social protection systems and measures aimed at reducing gender inequalities, and encourage higher education and job opportunities for women.
- \* 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 education workplaces to record and publish gender segregation and gender pay gap data.
- \* Require education employers to report the numbers of people made redundant with breakdowns by gender and other protected characteristics.
- \* Provide better information and advice for childcare and other care providers, 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.
- \* 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.

<sup>3</sup> Castellane, R. et. al. (2019), '[Analyzing the gender gap in European labour markets at the NUTS-1 level](#)', Cogent Social Sciences, Vol 5 (1).

## Childcare

*Although some of the evidence and recommendations contained in this section are specific to other departments, all issues raised are of relevance to the economy and should therefore be taken into consideration in all economic planning by the Department for the Economy.*

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

The WPG believes that childcare should be treated as a public good, rather than a private family matter, that is preventing many women from working. 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.

Childcare is a key part of our economic infrastructure and is a necessary prerequisite for people being able to return to work, particularly women. It will not be possible to transition to a stage where the lockdown is fully lifted without the issue of childcare being treated as a priority by the Executive.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Employers for Childcare (2020) [Childcare Survey 2020: Conclusions](#)

<sup>5</sup> See Childcare for All Campaign Statements on Childcare and COVID-19 ([June 2020](#)); and ([May 2020](#)).

Despite this, the issue of access to childcare was completely absent from the initial NI Executive Roadmap to recovery. 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.

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 their risk of poverty and is also likely to have health impacts for both parents and children. Accessible and affordable childcare is also fundamental to facilitating women's full and equal participation in both the economy and society in general.



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.<sup>6</sup>

The [Employers for Childcare Survey](#) results published in November 2020 outline some of the key risks the childcare sector in Northern Ireland face in the absence of a robust Childcare Strategy:<sup>7</sup>

- A collapse in the supply of quality childcare and increase in costs for parents and providers,
- Parents having to reduce their hours at work or leave work altogether,
- Our overall economic and societal recovery from Covid-19 will be held back
- Increase in levels of household and child poverty,
- Prolonged negative impact on the social and educational development of our children.



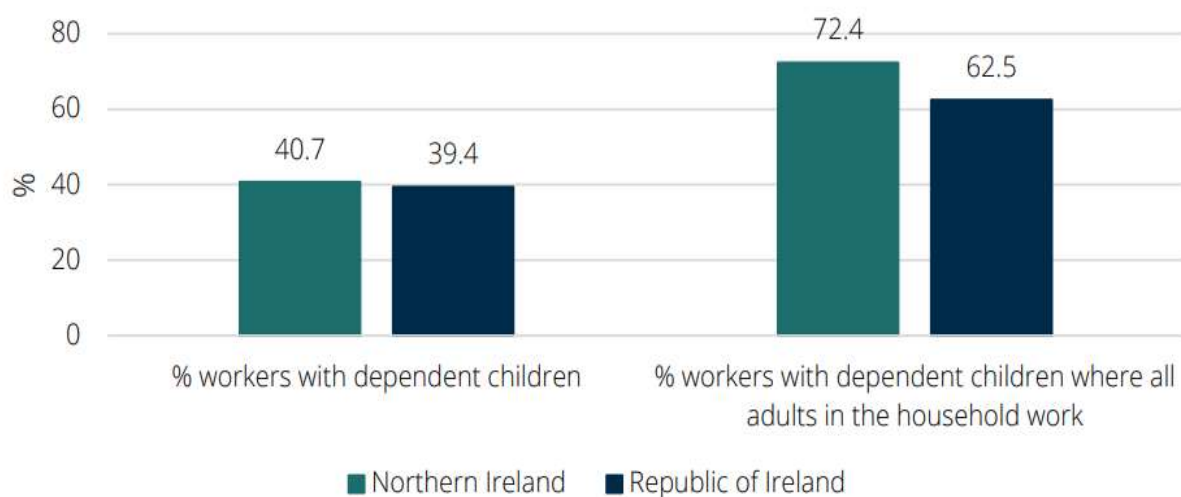
<sup>6</sup> See Childcare for All Campaign Statements on Childcare and COVID-19 ([June 2020](#)); and ([May 2020](#)).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> **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**



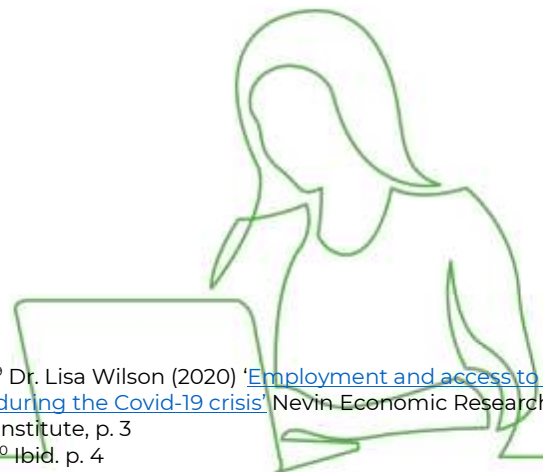
Source: Estimates for Northern Ireland are obtained from Q4 2019 data in the Northern Ireland element of the UK Labour force Survey. Estimates for the Republic of Ireland are obtained from 2019 data of the Labour Force Survey.

Source: NERI (2020) 'Employment, Dependent Children and Access to Childcare During the COVID-19 Crisis'<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> 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].

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Lisa Wilson (2020) 'Employment and access to childcare during the Covid-19 crisis' Nevin Economic Research Institute, p. 3

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 4

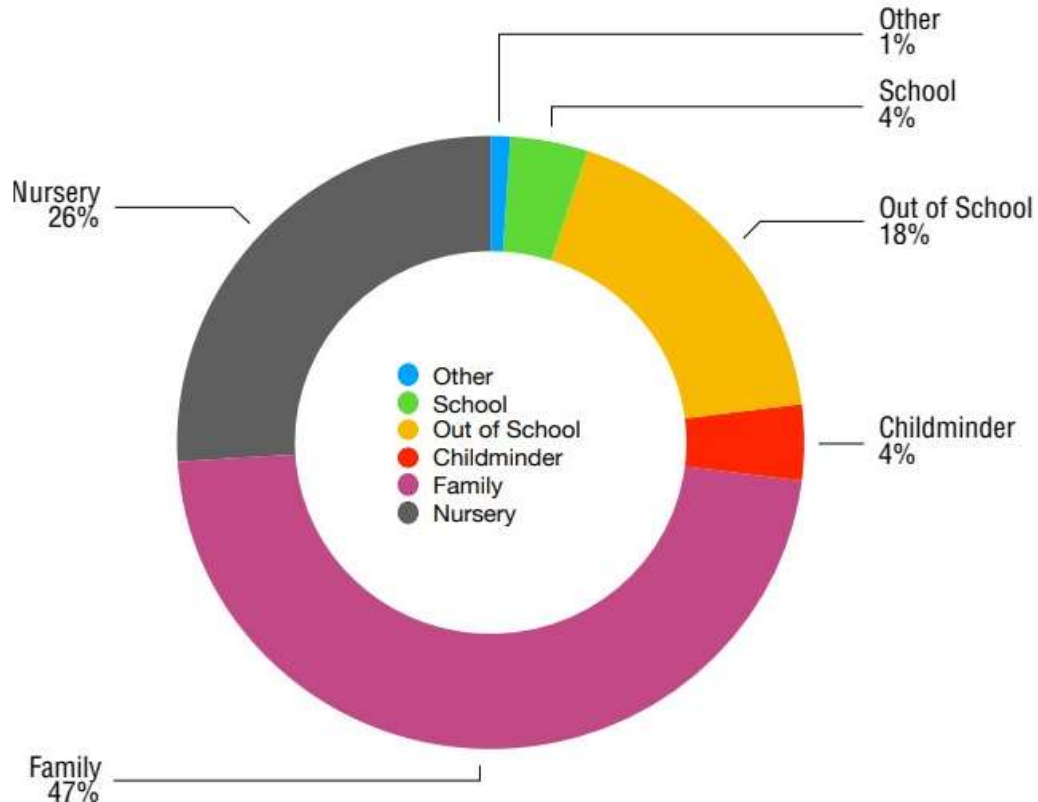


## Sources of Childcare

As you can see from the chart below, the Family Resources Survey conducted between 2015-2016 shows that 47% of families in Northern Ireland rely on support from other family members for childcare, to enable them to access the workforce. This means that without informal childcare provision from family members, almost half of all parents in Northern Ireland would be unable to access the workforce.

40% of families in NI have dependent children and 47% of these rely on support from other family members for childcare.

Clearly, greater understanding of the diverse needs of families, intergenerational relationships and childcare support within families is needed to ensure barriers to work, education and training are removed. The childcare model in Northern Ireland has one of the lowest levels of public provision in the UK. In contrast, 75% of childcare in Scotland is council-run and funded by government.



Source: Family Resources Survey, 2015-2016 (found in ICTU Report 'Childcare in NI'<sup>11</sup>)

<sup>11</sup> ICTU (2019) 'Childcare in Northern Ireland: Cost, Care and Gender Equality,' Better Work, Better Lives [Policy Paper], p. 6.

## Accessibility and Affordability

These barriers are exacerbated by the rising cost of childcare provision in Northern Ireland. The rising costs of childcare are of deep concern, particularly in the context of Covid-19 and the economic consequences we are already seeing as a result of it. Research from the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey in 2019<sup>12</sup> 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).

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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

45% of mothers attributed a change in their working hours to the cost of childcare.

Furthermore, 87% of men in paid work were full-time workers compared to 59% of women.<sup>15</sup> Since the crisis began, mums have been 1.5 times more likely than dads to have quit or lost their job or been furloughed.<sup>16</sup>

The gender pay gap largely exists due to a disproportionate number of women being involved in part-time employment, as a result of having childcare responsibility. For example, 59% of women were found to be in full-time paid work, compared to 87% of men. Therefore, it is clear that a gendered approach is essential to tackling what is clearly a gendered issue.



<sup>12</sup> Employers for Childcare (2019) '[Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019](#)'

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> ONS (2019) "[Families and the Labour Market](#)," p.6.

<sup>16</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) (2020) '[How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?](#)'

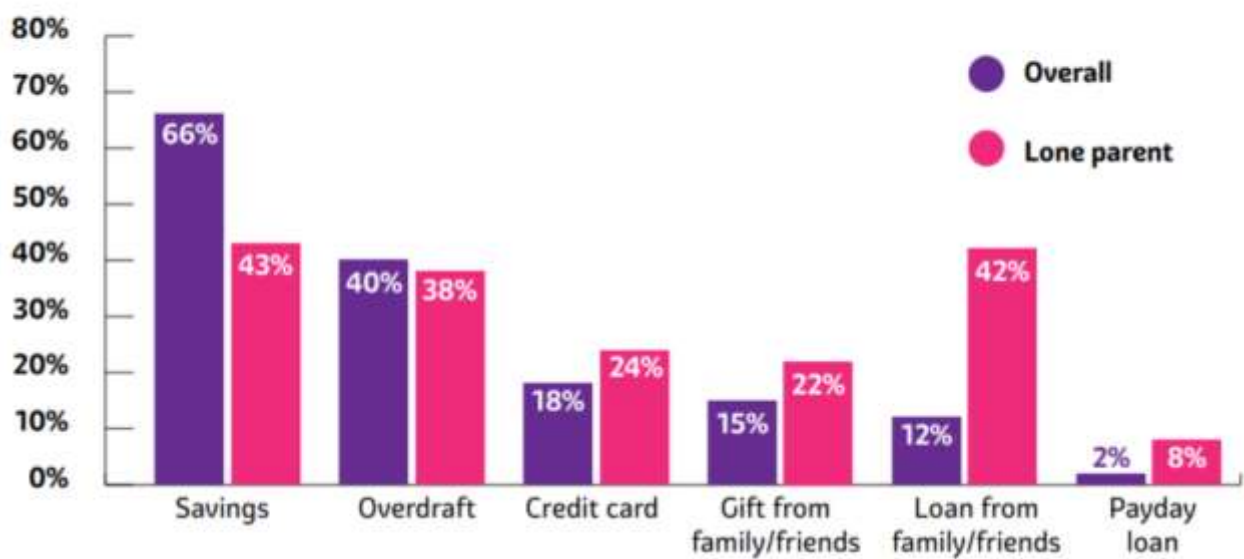
## Lone Parents

Lone parents are disproportionately impacted by the rising costs of childcare and lack of accessible public provision, the majority of whom are women.

Research from the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey shows that 63% of lone parent households report spending more than 20% of their overall household income on childcare, and that 1 in 10 lone parent households spend more than 50% of their overall income on childcare. It also shows that 51% of lone parent households resorted to means other than their income to pay for their childcare needs, including savings, an overdraft, loans and credit cards. A breakdown of the ways lone parents pay for childcare (other than through income) can be seen in the graph below.

Lone parents are more than 20% more likely to resort to using savings to pay for childcare; 30% more likely to ask for a loan from family and friends; and more than 63% of lone parents have had to cut back or go without another expense to pay their childcare bill.

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



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

## Childcare Workers

There are major concerns relating to attitudes towards childcare work, and care work more generally. The underinvestment and gender segregation in the sector shows that **care work is both an underpaid and undervalued profession, despite how critical this work is to the functioning of our economy.** 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). 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%). If childcare is to become an important and valued service, then the workers who provide that service also require to be valued. **Significant action needs to be taken in order to bring workers into the childcare sector, maintain staff morale and reduce turnover, and reward workers' skills and experience.**

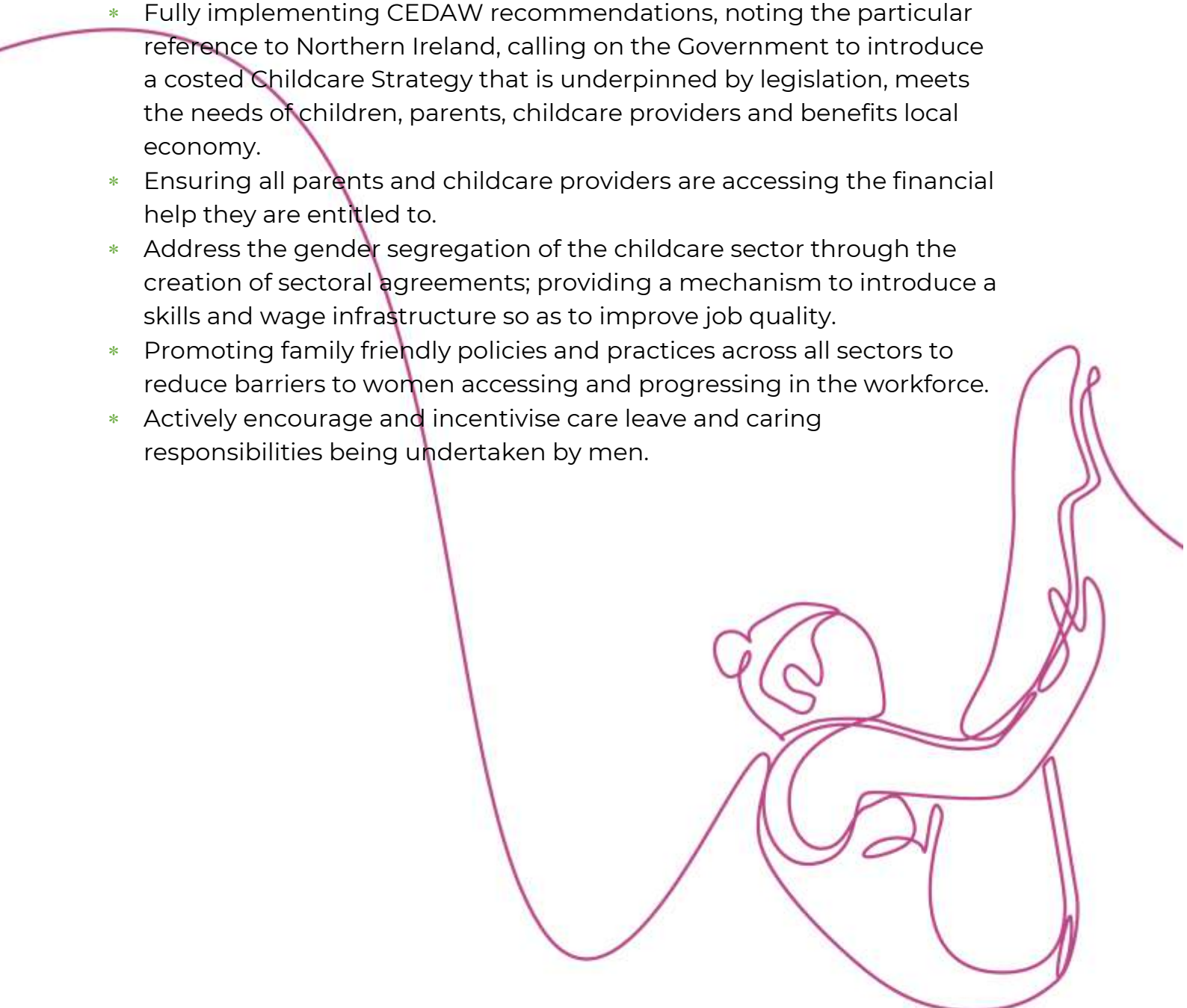
NI Executive commitments in the New Decade, New Approach Agreement include commitments to reduce carbon emissions, to work to transition to a zero-carbon society, and support clean and inclusive growth as part of a Green New Deal. **Childcare, and care more generally, is an already existing sustainable, green industry, with low levels of pollution and carbon emissions.**

This sector should be adequately funded, as part of a Green New Deal, and should be regarded as a key sustainable industry, in which workers are valued and paid a liveable wage. Northern Ireland still does not have a childcare strategy, nor a childcare provision, despite commitments in New Decade, New Approach. 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.
- \* Actively encourage and incentivise care leave and caring responsibilities being undertaken by men.



## Rural Women

Gender inequality is amplified for women in rural areas due to Access Poverty.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> **Despite making up 40% of all women in Northern Ireland, rural women receive just 1.3% of all government funding set aside for women.**

As labour relocates to a home working context, this could be more difficult for those in rural areas suffering from inferior access to high quality broadband.<sup>19</sup> This weakness will also affect home-schooling during closures and be exacerbated by concurrent demands for limited available bandwidth (data transfer capacity) among multiple household members.<sup>20</sup> 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:

- \* Rural childcare solutions need to be created to support rural women business owners and workers as we move forward.
- \* 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.
- \* Resourcing and support for rural community capacity building to aid Covid-19 recovery and sustainability.

<sup>17</sup> DAERA (2016) Public [Consultation](#) on TRPSI Framework

<sup>18</sup> NIRWN (2015) 'Rural Women's [Manifesto](#): Rural Women Speak'

<sup>19</sup> Commission for Rural Communities (2013) '[Rural Micro-Businesses: What Makes Some Thrive in a Challenging Economic Climate?](#)' Commission for Rural Communities: Gloucester, UK.

<sup>20</sup> Phillipson, J. et. al. (2020) '[The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Implications for Rural Economies](#)'

## 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 agreement<sup>21</sup> 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.



<sup>21</sup> [New Decade, New Approach Agreement](#) (2020), p.8.

The WPG endorse taking an intersectional feminist perspective 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'<sup>22</sup> 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.*

*The WPG would also like to endorse the following evidence and recommendations from the WBG:*

"WBG research indicates that a 2% GDP investment in care (social care, childcare, parental leave etc.), creates double the amount of jobs for women and almost as many for men than the same investment in construction.<sup>23</sup> **Investment in free universal childcare especially, returns almost all of its initial investment.**"<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) (2016), '[Investing in a Care Economy: A gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries](#)'

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 21.

This is of particular importance to Northern Ireland given our calls for a universal, free and high-quality childcare provision. If the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Department of Education, introduce free universal childcare, statistics from the WBG submission to HM Treasury indicate that a full return would be made on this investment through additional tax revenue generated by the additional jobs created.<sup>25</sup>

## 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,
- \* Encourage women and girls into male-dominated green sectors that are encouraged through a Northern Ireland Green New Deal.
- \* Through increased investment in care jobs and the care sector (including childcare), not only will women's employment and economic opportunities increase, but children from disadvantaged backgrounds will benefit from increasing qualities of childcare and education,
- \* Broaden definitions of 'green jobs' beyond construction and technology to incorporate the care sector as an already existing low carbon, high compensate sector that is increasingly neglected,
- \* Promoting economic, ecological and carbon education campaigns for schools and the wider public, adequately funded through a Climate Change Act and within the Programme for Government,
- \* Promote a cultural shift towards valuing care as a key part of the infrastructure of the environment and economy.



<sup>25</sup> WBG (2020), '[Budget Representation to HM Treasury: Invest in Social Infrastructure](#)', UK Women's Budget Group.

# Health Pillar



## Abortion, Maternal Health & Bodily Autonomy

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

Women must also have information about and be able to access sexual and reproductive health services, including contraception, emergency contraception and the means to access safe abortion care. *Sex and relationships education is, at present, dependent on individual schools who can choose who to invite to cover the topic and can do so in a way that does not deal with these issues head on.* However, this does not adequately provide young people with information regarding maternal health and bodily autonomy issues.

International human rights law explicitly recognises the rights to sexual and reproductive health and bodily autonomy. These rights give rise to positive state obligations to ensure abortion-related information and services and to remove medically unnecessary barriers that deny practical access.<sup>26</sup>

### 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.

<sup>26</sup> Centre for Reproductive Rights (2020) '[Breaking Ground: Treaty Monitoring Bodies on Reproductive Rights](#)', pp 12-14.

# Social Justice Pillar



## Racial Justice

Racism is an issue that is highly prevalent in Northern Ireland. In 2016-17, statistics show that racially motivated hate crime overtook sectarian hate crime for the first time in the history of Northern Ireland.<sup>27</sup> We have a duty to recognise and dismantle the pillars that uphold systemic racism. This includes making available educational resources in schools for combatting these issues. 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.<sup>28</sup>

*Research from the WBG, LSE, Queen Mary University of London and the Fawcett Society<sup>29</sup> shows that 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. Furthermore, 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.*

### Summary of Recommendations:

- \* Support families' access to educational resources and equipment at home to minimise the increased racial attainment gaps - including the provision of IT equipment and additional support for parents.

<sup>27</sup> Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) (2018) '[Trends in Hate Motivated Incidents and Crimes Recorded](#) by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2017/18', p.6

<sup>28</sup> NHS Confederation (2020) '[BME Leadership Network Member Briefing](#)'

<sup>29</sup> WBG et. al. (2020), '[BAME women and COVID-19 - Research Evidence](#)'

## Politics, Public Life, Peacebuilding & Decision Making

The 2014 Stormont House Agreement (SHA) outlined structures to deal with the past in Northern Ireland, but contained no specific mechanisms for increasing the involvement of women. Extensive consultation with women<sup>30</sup> found that many feel disempowered, have difficulty circumnavigating community gate-keepers (including paramilitary groups) and fear harm if they were to speak out. The COVID-19 crisis with its particular impacts on women's income, socioeconomic independence and increased caring responsibilities is likely to compound barriers to women's involvement in peacebuilding and decision-making processes.

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.

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.

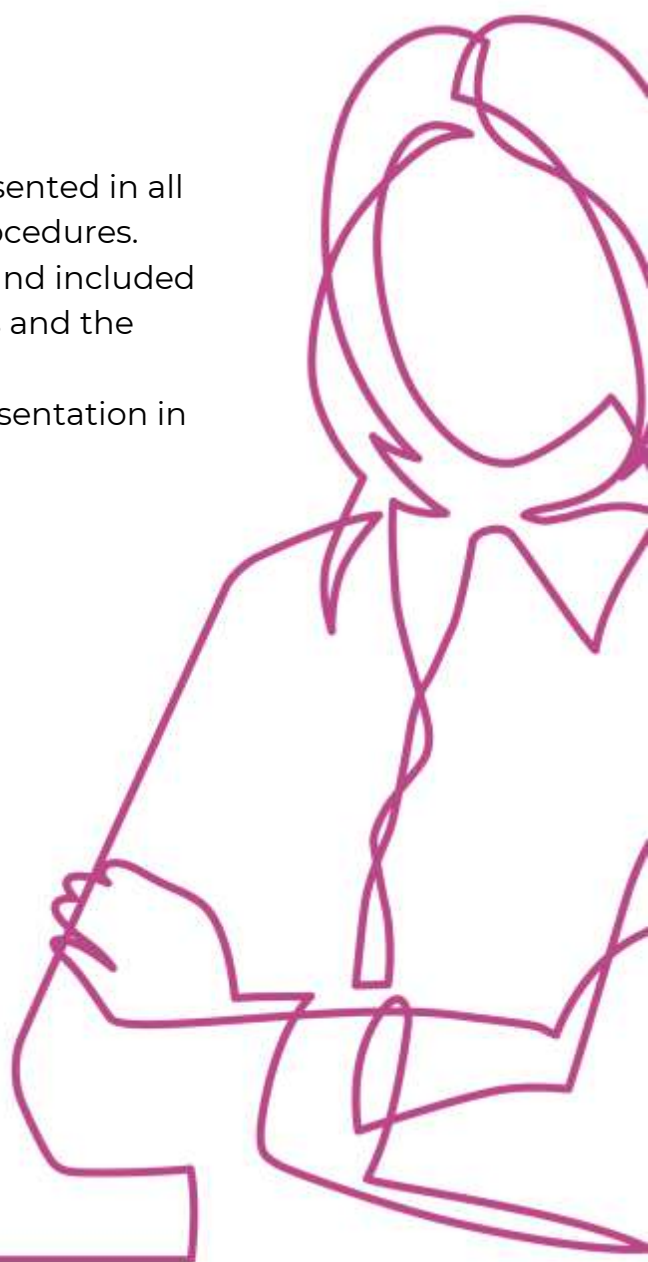
<sup>30</sup> [Council of Europe Convention](#) on the prevention and combating violence against women and girls (Istanbul Convention, 2011)

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, education, infrastructure, budgets, the Programme for Government and more.

### 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.
- \* Accelerate action to reach gender equal representation in public bodies.



## 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.

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.

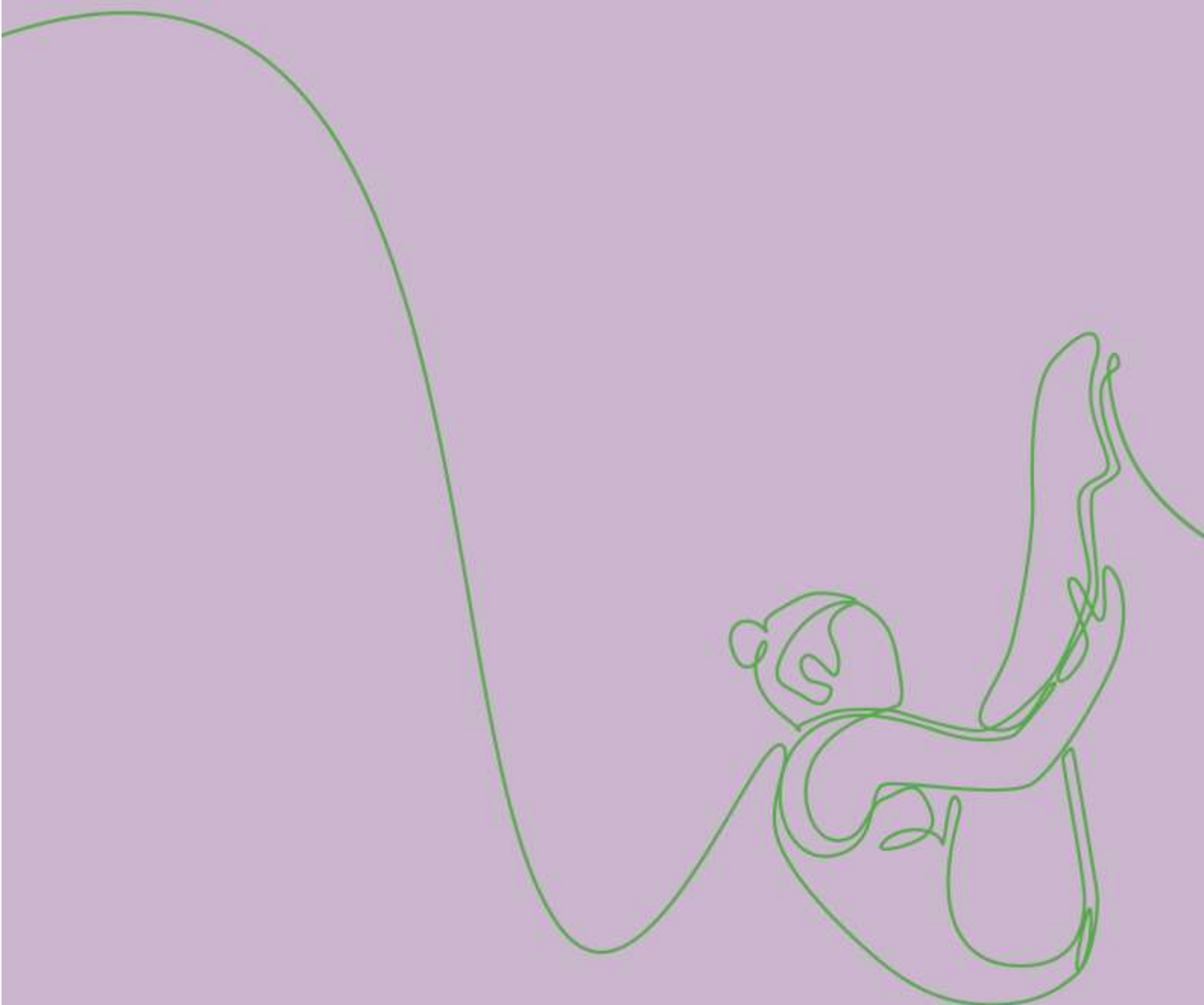
Newcomer, asylum seeking and refugee families also face challenges in accessing affordable internet services, which are critical for them to maintain contact with their extended families and through this, support their health and wellbeing<sup>31</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the potential of technology in connecting people and also in providing support services, and these advantages should be shared out among all of society.



<sup>31</sup> See the [Participation and Practice of Rights \(PPR\) campaign](#) 'Internet Access for All' with 670 signatures [as of 07.01.21]

## Summary of Recommendations:

- \* 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.



# Cultural Pillar



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

Sexism and the sexist portrayal of women and girls in the media remains a serious issue. 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.”<sup>32</sup> This demonstrates clearly the impact that this kind of media coverage has; while the women directly named may have developed a “thick skin,” young women looking on will often exclude themselves for careers they would otherwise choose because of this scrutiny.

The same research from Girlguiding UK reports that **young women are negatively influenced by advertising, in both traditional media and social media,** that promotes certain beauty standards and encourages the use of cosmetic surgery, extremely restrictive dieting and similar methods including medically unsafe detox and diet products. With eating disorders on the rise<sup>33</sup> 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.

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.



<sup>32</sup> Girlguiding UK (2019), '[Girls' attitudes survey](#)'

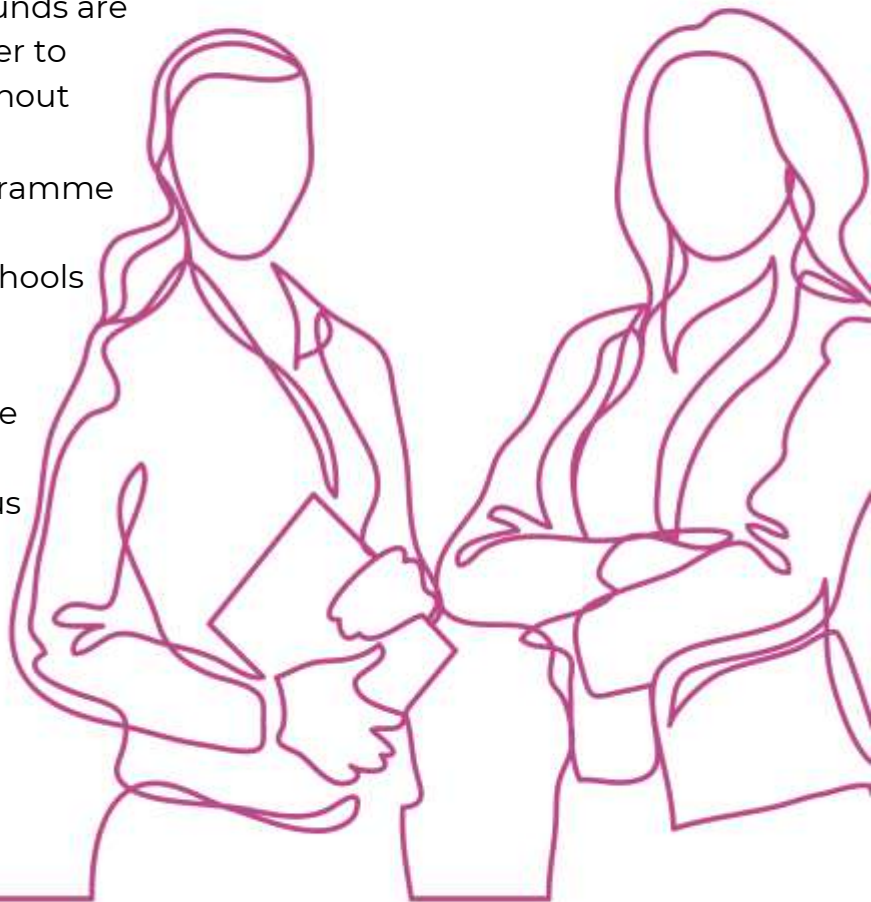
<sup>33</sup> Marsh, S. (2019) "[Hospital admissions for eating disorders surge to highest in eight years](#)" The Guardian [article]

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 plan,<sup>34</sup> this will not be carried out until 2022. 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.

As previously mentioned, sex and relationships education is, at present, dependent on individual schools who can choose who to invite to cover the topic and can do so in a way that does not deal with these issues head on. In addition they are sometimes entirely heteronormative, not covering LGBTQ+ relationships at all, and therefore not providing the necessary skills to an especially vulnerable demographic.

### Raise Your Voice education recommendations (endorsed by the WPG):

- \* Begin a public awareness campaign as soon as possible, ensuring that funds are identified and ring fenced in order to make sure that this happens without delay.
- \* A comprehensive, inclusive programme should be developed on sex and relationships education, for all schools and third level institutions.
- \* Ensure all awareness raising programmes in schools are in line with CEDAW General Recommendation 35, with a focus on informing and educating individuals on consent, sexual harassment and victim blaming to dismantle the belief that women and girls are responsible for their own safety.



<sup>34</sup> Northern Ireland Department of Justice (2020) Gillen Review: [Implementation Plan](#).

## 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. For instance, one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (4.7) states:

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



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

The extent to which women more generally feel prepared to participate in education and training depends on a number of factors including childcare, transport and cost. Women's organisations offer community education which attempts to address these barriers particularly for women from disadvantaged and rural areas. The drive behind the introduction of Welfare Reform was to get more people into work. Women need access to education and training to make the move from benefits to work, yet the Government is not supporting this.

COVID-19 has led to huge disruptions to the lives of women, as schools closed and many women faced having to balance home-schooling, childcare, work from home and their own educational needs.

The information on the unequal distribution of care and gender equality gaps that remain in the UK highlight the urgent need to prioritise women's access to education and training; particularly as many will have lost their jobs due to COVID-19 or may risk future job losses due to automation with any technological revolution.

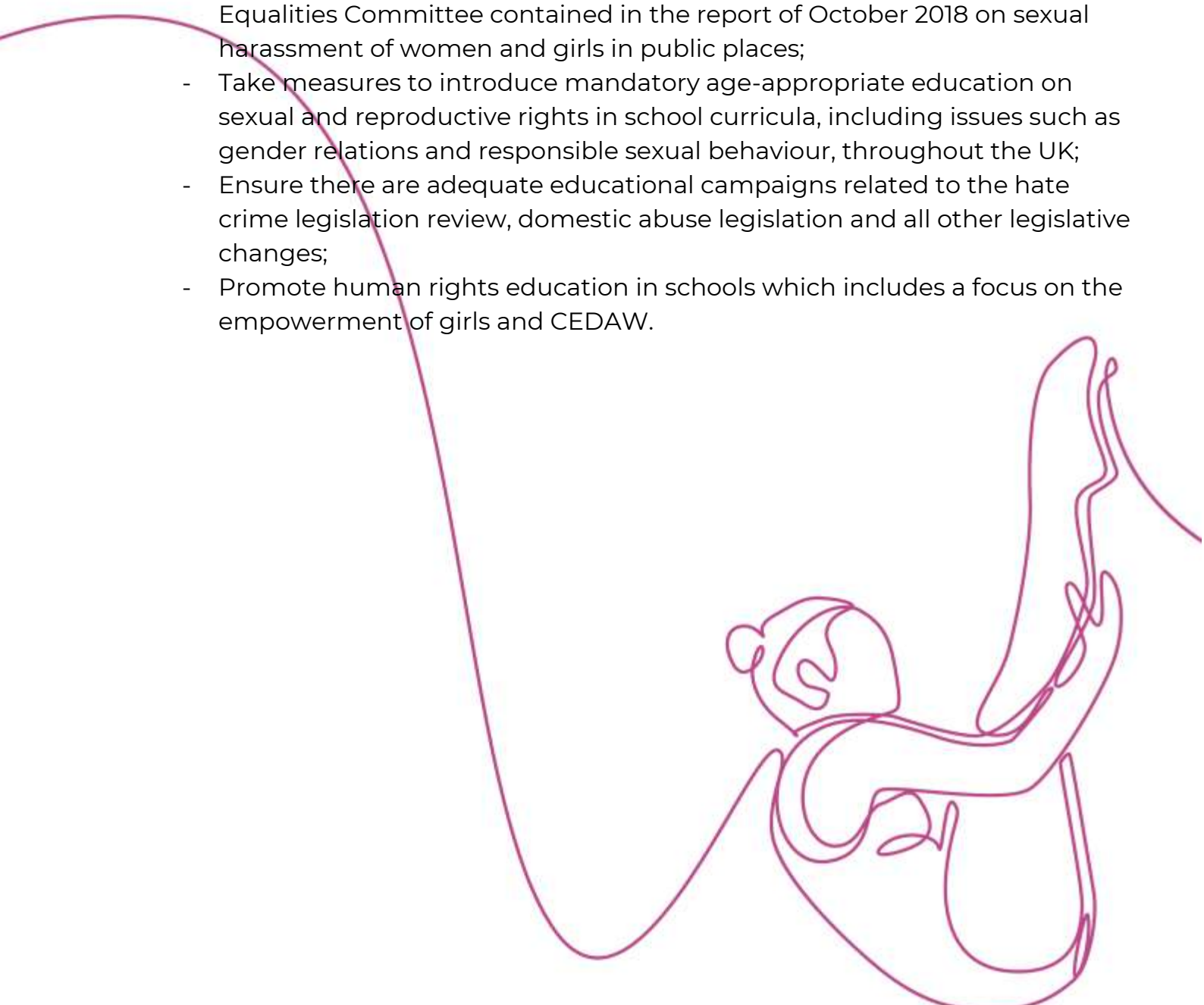
Intersectional policy-making is needed to address issues such as the digital divide, issues for women from migrant backgrounds struggling with language barriers in supporting children with home-schooling, rural access poverty, limited support for parents with disabled children and more is needed.

## Summary of Recommendations:

- \* An increased focus on equality and diversity should be introduced into the curriculum when it is next updated.
- \* While distance learning has to continue, materials should be made accessible to all students so inequalities do not further widen. Opportunities for teaching about equality and diversity through these materials should be considered, particularly when new content is being developed / used.
- \* Initial teacher training - and subsequent CPD opportunities - should place a greater emphasis on equality and diversity. The teacher competency framework for initial teacher education (ITE) should cover both how to teach about these themes effectively within the classroom and how to meet pupils' diverse social and educational needs. The latter should include consideration of a wide range of factors that may inhibit children's learning i.e. not just disability, but also covering sexuality or gender identity, etc. Anti-bias training should also be considered.
- \* Likewise, Principals and senior school managers should, as standard, receive training examining equality and diversity, including the underpinning legislation.
- \* The Department of Education (DoE) should adequately resource the co-development of equality and diversity workshops, for staff and pupils, with community organisations working with racialised, LGBT+, disabled, and migrant communities.
- \* Regular guidance should be issued to schools by the DoE on equality and diversity.
- \* Indicators should be introduced into the inspection process that look specifically at how schools are addressing equality and diversity.
- \* Furthermore, DoE should prioritise measures on equality and diversity explicitly in the processes of school improvement.
- \* Section 75 requirements and the Sex Discrimination (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.

*(continued on next page)*

- \* 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 the 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.



## 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 of Education. 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  
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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 of Education works with other NI Departments to tackle the issues raised in this report.** As a matter of urgency, the Department should:

- \* Support the introduction of a fully funded Childcare Strategy which recognises the provision of affordable and accessible childcare as a necessary facilitator of women's full and equal participation in the economy.
- \* Update the school curriculum to include comprehensive relationships and sexuality education, as well as equality and diversity education.
- \* Meaningfully engage with women's sector organisations in the development of future policies around women's training and education.
- \* Carefully consider the gendered impacts of all policies and take action to mitigate against any adverse impacts.