



Women's
Policy Group NI

NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan

Recommendations:

Department of Finance

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Abstract

The evidence and contents of this report contain recommendations specific to the Department of Finance, 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 funding issues within the women's sector, 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 of Finance will not have direct responsibility for all issues raised in this report, they have been included as we believe an inter-departmental approach is crucial to tackling these issues effectively. Furthermore, some issues which are relevant to other Departments have been included as they require significant amounts of funding beyond the scope of individual Departments, and therefore require intervention by the Department of Finance.



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)
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Geraldine Alexander (Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance)
Helen Flynn (Human Rights Consortium)
Helen Crickard (Reclaim the Agenda)
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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



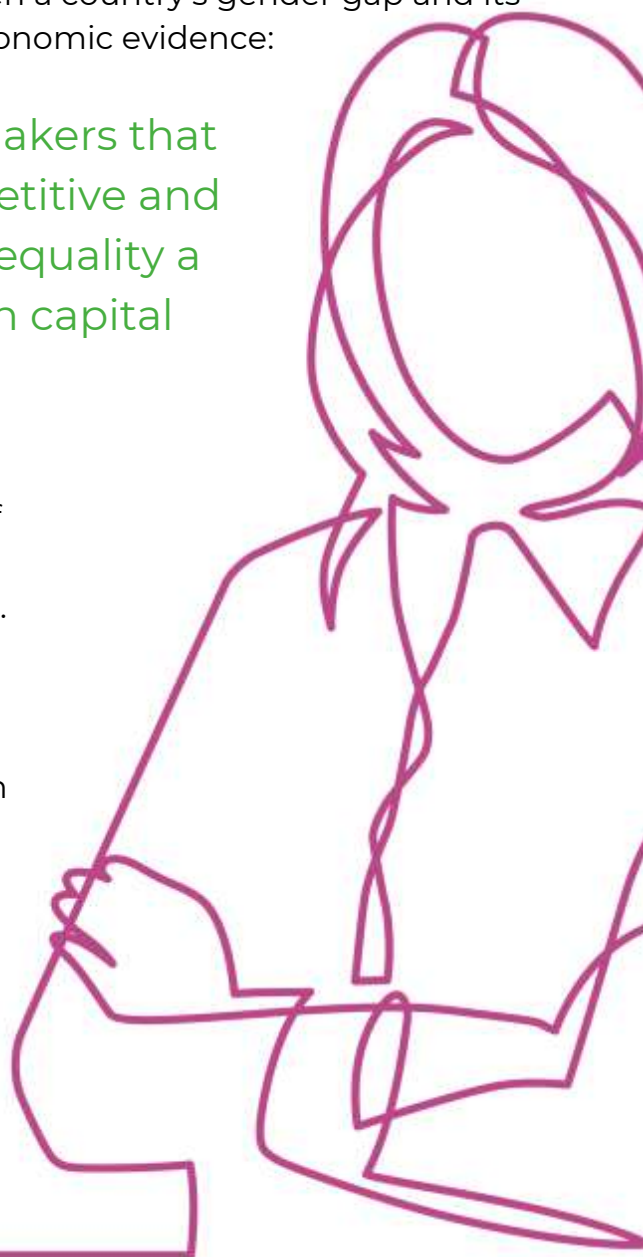
Gender Segregated Labour Markets and Care Work

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.”¹

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;² whilst unpaid carers across all the UK provide social care worth £57 billion per year.³ 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.



¹ World Economic Forum (2020) 'Mind the 100 Year Gap', [Global Gender Gap Report 2020](#), p.33.

² Carers NI (2015), '[NI Carers save government £4.6 billion a year](#)'; see also: Carers NI (2017) '[State of Caring 2017](#)'

³ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2017), '[Unpaid carers provide social care worth £57 billion](#)'

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.
- * 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.
- * 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.
- * 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.



Women's Poverty and Austerity

Research suggests that austerity 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.⁴ 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.**⁵

Demand for food banks in Northern Ireland has soared because of COVID-19. In April the number of emergency food parcels given out by the Trussell Trust locally rose 142% compared to the same time last year.⁶ 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.



⁴ Cracknell, R. and Keen, R. (2017) "Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes," [Commons Briefing Papers](#) SN06758,

⁵ Institute for Social and Economic Research (2020) [Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study](#), COVID-19 Survey, Briefing Note, University of Essex.

⁶ Black, J. (2020) ["Coronavirus crisis sees demand for foodbanks in Northern Ireland soar"](#), Belfast Telegraph [article]

Women make up the majority of Universal Credit claimants, a figure which has risen significantly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and which will continue to increase as the economic consequences of the pandemic continue to be felt.⁷

The first eight weeks of the pandemic saw an 80% increase in claimants (between 1st March and 26th April 2020), and as of 9th July 2020, there were 5.6 million people on Universal Credit.

The Women's Budget Group (WBG) has urged the Government not to turn to austerity measures to pay for the cost of the crisis. The WBG stressed that this will repeat the past and impact poor, BAME and disabled women the most. The WBG has suggested a range of alternative ways to pay for the measures needed including investment in social infrastructure to boost the economy, increased taxes on wealth and tackling tax evasion, avoidance and havens.⁸

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Increase the level of Carer's Allowance and consider a one-off Coronavirus supplement of £20 a week to match the rise in Universal Credit as suggested by Carers UK.⁹ This would particularly benefit women who provide higher levels of care.
- * 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.

(continued on next page)

⁷ 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).

⁸ Women's Budget Group (2020) "[Easing Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women](#)" [Briefing Paper]

⁹ Carers Week (2020), '[Carers Week 2020 Research Report](#): The rise in the number of unpaid carers during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak'

- * 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 even after lockdown has ended to help people get back on their feet.
 - 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
 - o Extend the suspension of benefit deductions to include Universal Credit Advance Payments.
 - o 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.

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.¹⁰



¹⁰ 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 Children¹¹ 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,
- Over five in ten to be behind on rent or other essential bills.

Citizens Advice reports¹² 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.**



¹¹ 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]

¹² Citizens Advice (2016) [“Coronavirus claimants facing further hardship in wait for Universal Credit”](#) [Press Release]

Before the pandemic, research by the [Women's Regional Consortium](#)¹³ 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.

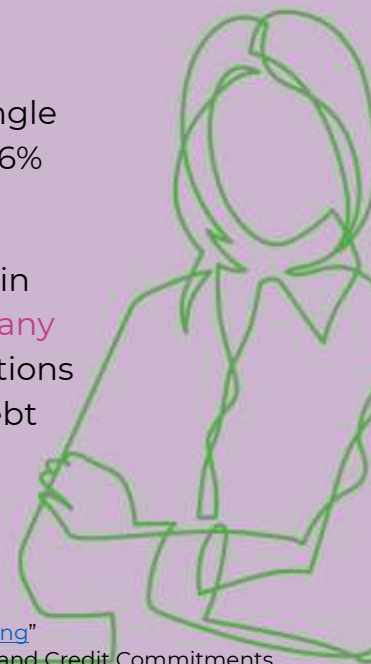
Other pre-crisis [Office of National Statistics \(ONS\)](#) data¹⁴ shows that women are consistently more vulnerable to poverty:

- 39% of women and 34% of men reported it was a struggle to keep up with bills some or most of the time,
- 26% of women and 23% of men said they ran out of money by the end of the month, and
- 29% of women and 23% of men said they would not be able to make ends meet for a month or less if they lost their main source of income.

Single parents are likely to be particularly affected by this and, in Northern Ireland, the majority of single parent households are headed by a woman (91%):¹⁵

- An alarming 42% of single parents are anticipating living on less than £500 per month,¹⁶ due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Single parents 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.

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.



¹³ Women's Regional Consortium, (2020) "[Making Ends Meet: Women's Perspectives on Access to Lending](#)"

¹⁴ Office for National Statistics (2020) "[Early indicator estimates from the Wealth and Assets Survey: Bills and Credit Commitments, April 2018 to September 2019.](#)"

¹⁵ Northern Ireland Assembly (2014) Census 2011 – Key Statistics for Gender, Research and Information Service [Research Paper](#), Ronan Savage and Dr Raymond Russell.

¹⁶ Turn2US (2020) Insight [Briefing](#): Coronavirus.

While the costs of implementing these actions may act as a barrier, the costs of not taking action will ultimately be much higher. We recognise that some policy decisions are not possible through devolved institutions and when looking at the UK as a whole, the WPG would encourage gender-budgeting and progressive fiscal and monetary policy making from the UK government. In particular, the WPG would like to endorse calls from Tax Justice UK in agreeing common goals to build back a better world affected by coronavirus. These calls include drastic tax reform across the UK, as Tax Justice UK have highlighted that:

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

The UK’s approach to tax is dysfunctional: we don’t raise enough money, avoidance is rife and wealth is under-taxed. Despite progress, estimates suggest that £35 billion to £90 billion of tax goes uncollected per year. The government also spends over £164bn a year on tax reliefs - many of which are badly targeted and largely benefit the well off and big companies. The corporate tax rate has been slashed from 28% in 2010 to the current 19%...

The UK also contributes through its reliefs and loopholes to a broken international tax system, which deprives other countries of revenue. The Covid-19 crisis shows that the government has huge financial power, flexibility and choice over how to support public spending. A fair tax system should underpin more investment in high quality public services and we must be ready to challenge those who are already arguing for austerity 2.0.”¹⁷

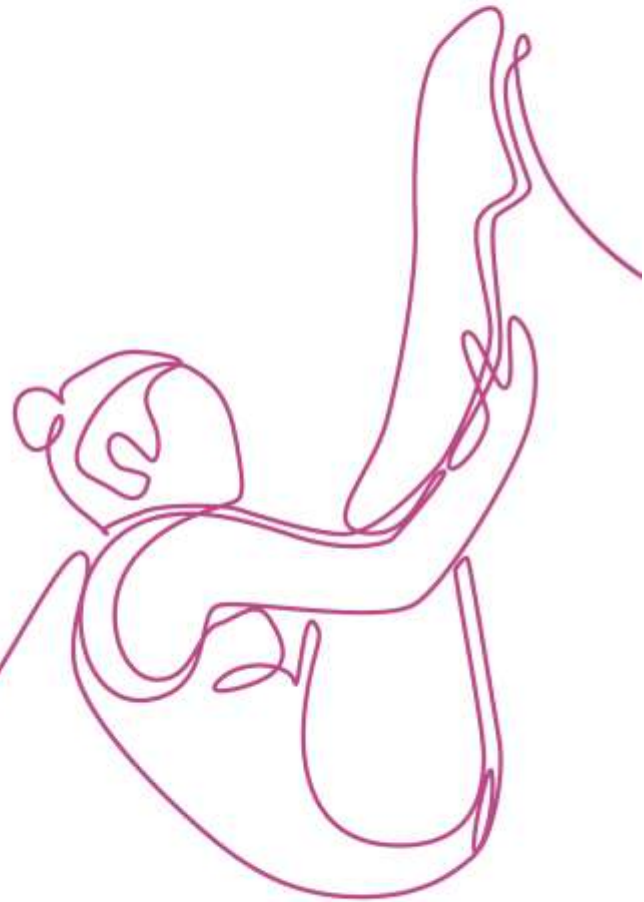


¹⁷ Tax Justice UK (2020) [‘Progressive Groups Call for Tax Reform post-COVID’](#) [article]

We support the following recommendations from Tax Justice UK:¹⁸

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

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



¹⁸ Cracknell, R. and Keen, R. (2017) '[Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes](#)' [Commons Briefing Papers SN06758].

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).
- * 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. Providing short-term relief on debt repayments and evictions is not enough and, in many cases, will simply defer arrears until a later date.
- * 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

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.

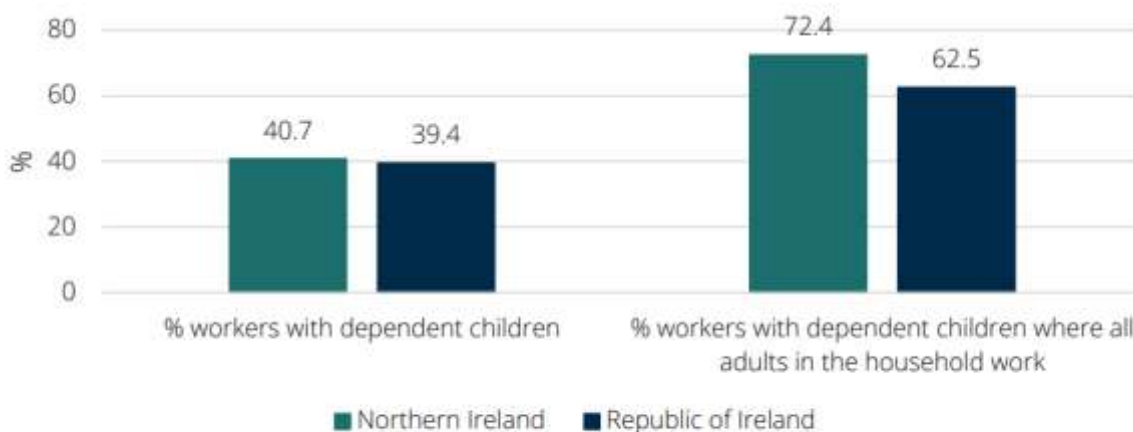
Whilst the Job Retention Scheme, amendments to Universal Credit and other benefits and expansion of the definition of key workers did provide a degree of support for some women, a longer-term plan is required to ensure all women affected by job losses can provide for themselves and their families both 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. *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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 47% of families in Northern Ireland rely on support from other family members for childcare to enable them to access the workforce.²² 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 In Brief No. 76 May 2020, p.4.

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

²⁰ 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].

²¹ Dr. Lisa Wilson (2020), '[Employment and access to childcare during the Covid-19 crisis](#)', Nevin Economic Research Institute, p.3.

²² Ibid, p.5.

Research from the Fawcett Society, UK Women's Budget Group (WBG) 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.²³ 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 2019²⁴ 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.



²³ 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.

²⁴ Employers for Childcare (2019), '[Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019](#)'

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) report²⁵ 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.'²⁶

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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ Furthermore, 87% of men in paid work were full-time workers compared to 59% of women.²⁹

Since the crisis began, mums have been 1.5 times more likely than dads to have quit or lost their job or been furloughed.³⁰

In particular, we would like to reference TUC concerns³¹ 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 [...]"

²⁵ Trades Union Congress (2020), '[Forced out: The cost of getting childcare wrong](#)'

²⁶ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2017), '[Unpaid carers provide social care worth £57 billion](#)', p.2.

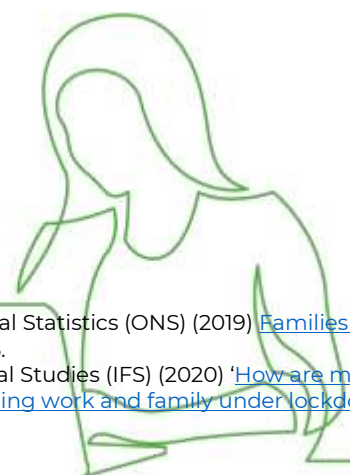
²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2019) [Families and the Labour Market](#), p.6.

³⁰ Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) (2020) '[How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?](#)'

³¹ Ibid. 26, p.4.

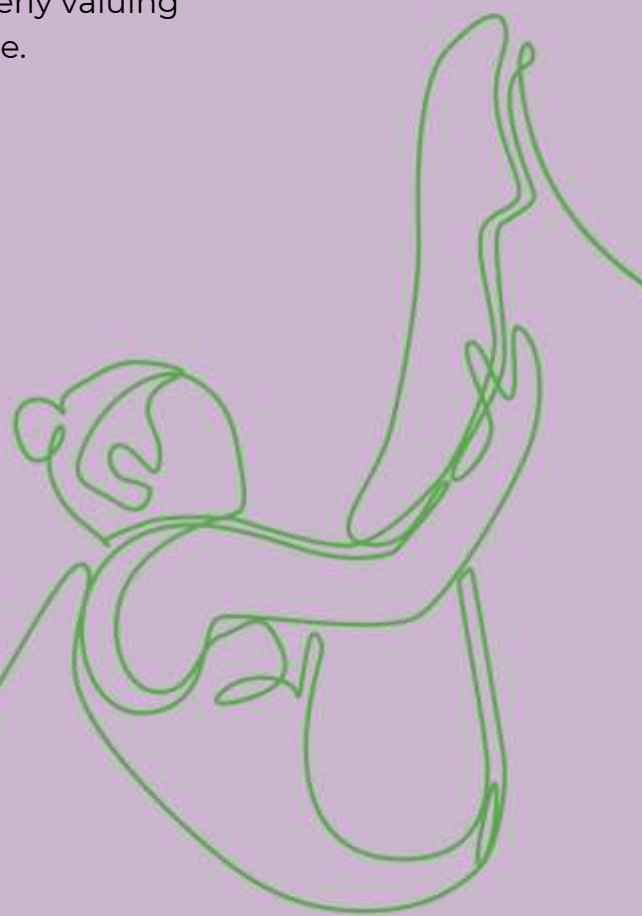


In relation to workers in the childcare sector, there are major concerns relating to the attitudes of undervaluing care work through the underinvestment and gender segregation in the sector. Almost half of all childcare workers earn below the real living wage (48%). This is a significantly higher figure 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.³²

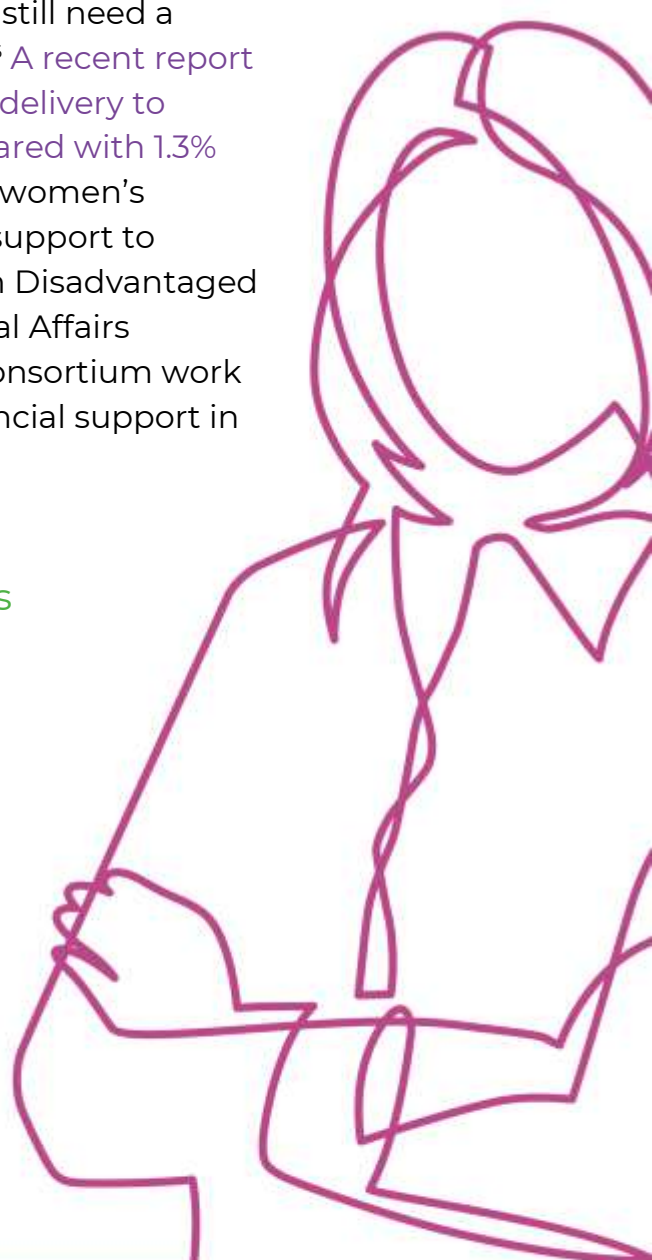
³² Childcare has been identified as an issue across the world and different solutions implemented. For example in Italy, the Cura Italia economic package includes parental leave of up to 15 days paid at 50% of salary, for parents of children under 12 or children with disabilities of any age. The scheme is designed for employees in the private sector and self employed people, and the days are to be used between both parents (where relevant). Separate provision is being made for public sector workers. Parents can also request a set number of days' paid leave in each month or babysitter vouchers worth up to €600. The package also includes a €5 million ring fenced element for female entrepreneurship in a fund for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). In Belgium, paid part time parental leave schemes have been introduced.

Rural Women

Gender inequality is amplified for women in rural areas due to Access Poverty.³³ 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.³⁴ Women in Northern Ireland remain under-represented in public and political life,³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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). An independent Evaluation of this Consortium work concluded that rural women needed additional financial support in this Programme:³⁸

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



³³ DAERA (2016) Public [Consultation](#) on TRPSI Framework

³⁴ NIRWN (2015) 'Rural Women's [Manifesto](#): Rural Women Speak'

³⁵ NI Assembly (2014) [Briefing Paper](#): 'Women and Public Appointments in NI'

³⁶ Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015)

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

As a result of no Executive in place for three years, this issue has never been redressed. It is imperative that women in rural areas have proposed future budgets and that the Programme for government and policy recovery planning is assessed for rural impacts,¹² to ensure the inequity of Government resourcing does not continue.

Northern Ireland 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.

After Brexit, rural women will no longer have access to EU Rural Development funding and policy development and we have no indigenous rural development policy of our own.

There is a need for governments to view organisations in this sector in a similar light to private and public businesses and employees, providing financial support to sustain their viability. Support is especially justified, given that in many rural communities these organisations play a leading role in organising and supporting older and vulnerable residents. 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 challenges.³⁹ 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.



³⁹ Milbourne, L. and 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.

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.
- * Rural business support initiatives are required.
- * Increase digital identification for rural SMEs to allow innovative ways of securing collateral and credit histories.
- * This includes providing digital, virtual, and mobile-based business training, coaching, and mentoring related to economic recovery, digital marketing and communication channels, and overall digital financial literacy.

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 must be met from a perspective that will support tackling gender inequality.⁴⁰

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.**



⁴⁰ [New Decade, New Approach Agreement](#) (2020), p.8

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Provide subsidies and other incentives, including paid education leave, to support women, particularly low-income and Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (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,
- * 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,
- * Implement a 30-hour paid work week in recognition of unavoidable unpaid care,
- * 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,
- * Supporting and developing sustainable small businesses that reduce domestic work through mass preparation and distribution of locally grown food.



Health Pillar



Trans Healthcare

The Brackenburn Clinic, which provides gender transition related health care to adult trans people in Northern Ireland, has not accepted any new patients since March 2018, and those on the waiting list (now 460 long) have so far been waiting up to 3 years and 8 months for a first appointment.⁴¹ 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; most recently made worst by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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. The intensity of these psychiatric assessments are not seen anywhere else in healthcare, and demonstrate the disproportionate institutional barriers faced by trans people to reproductive care, bodily autonomy and basic human rights. 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.

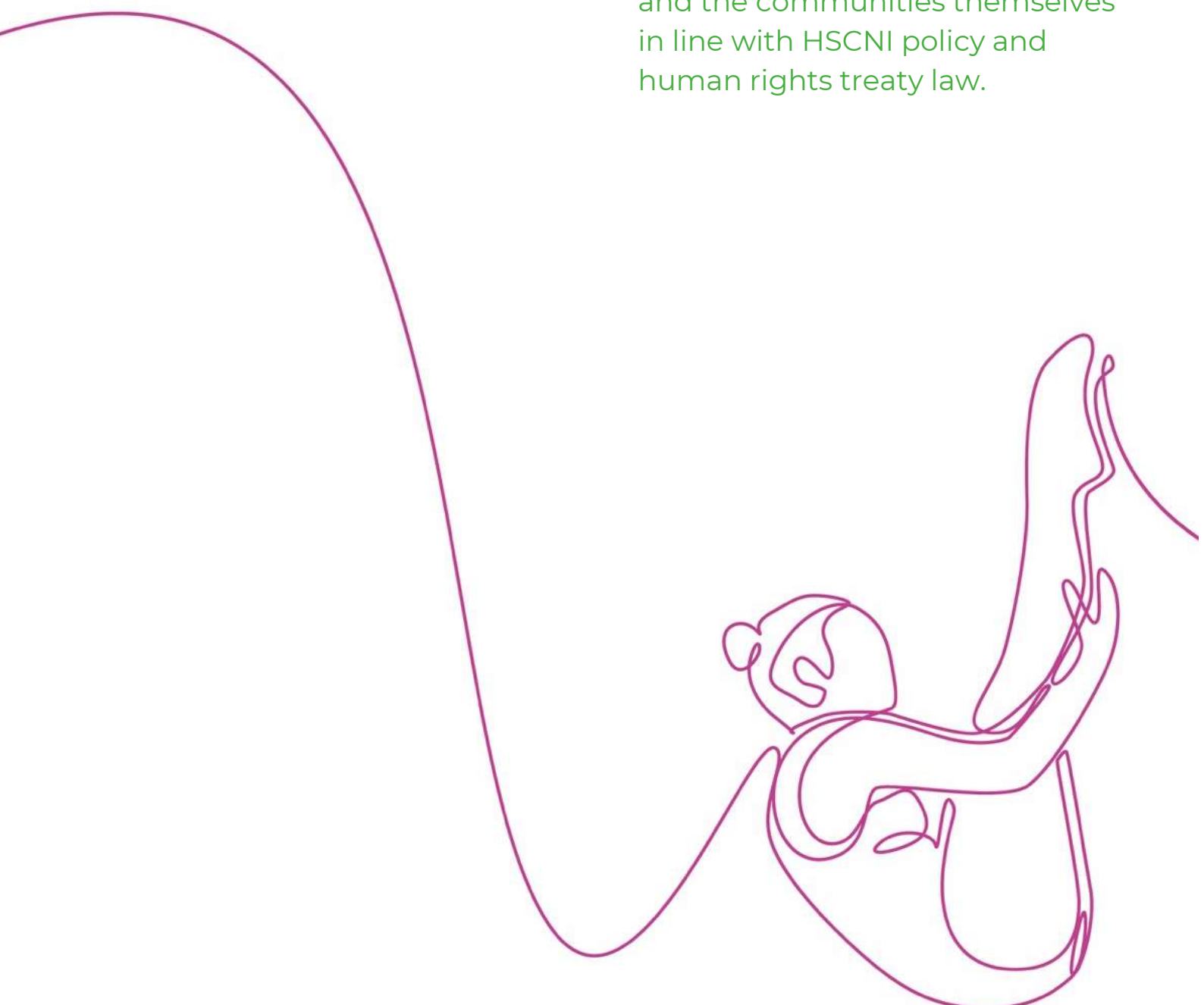


⁴¹ BHSCT FoI Request, June 2020 [Unpublished]

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.



Abortion, Maternal Health and Bodily Autonomy

As of October 2019, Northern Ireland is obligated by UK law to make abortion services available to women in Northern Ireland. However, Northern Ireland has failed to comply with this legislation, and the commissioning of abortion services is still yet to be seen. The following evidence and recommendations have been included in this report for the Department of Finance as Executive-wide action is required to ensure this issue is effectively addressed.

We acknowledge that the issues and recommendations contained in this section are primarily the responsibility of the Department of Health. However, it is crucial that the Department of Finance 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. The WPG 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 access.⁴²

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 abortion.⁴³

⁴² Centre for Reproductive Rights (2020) '[Breaking Ground: Treaty Monitoring Bodies on Reproductive Rights](#)' pp 12-14.

⁴³ Todd-Gher, J. and Shah, P. K. (2020) '[Abortion in the context of COVID-19: A Human Rights Imperative](#)'

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.⁴⁴

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,⁴⁵ therefore they should be able to fully access healthcare at home during this global pandemic.⁴⁶

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.**

⁴⁴ For details on the best provision for NI, see the [WPG response to the NIO Abortion Framework Consultation](#).

⁴⁵ For more information on the heavy financial, emotional and logistical burden of travelling to GB on women, see [CEDAW Committee comments](#) (2018)

⁴⁶ World Health Organisation (2019) '[Self Care Interventions](#)' [Recommended Guidelines]

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.

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.

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, 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.

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 women⁴⁷ 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, socio-economic independence and increased caring responsibilities is likely to compound barriers to women's involvement in peacebuilding and decision-making processes.

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.

⁴⁷ [Council of Europe Convention](#) on the prevention and combating violence against women and girls (Istanbul Convention, 2011)

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. 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.

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',⁴⁸ which were developed in 2015 by a multi-disciplinary group of human rights experts and academics, could assist in achieving this.

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.

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.
- * Ensure the women's sector is consulted with and included in the co-design of all departmental strategies and the Programme for Government.

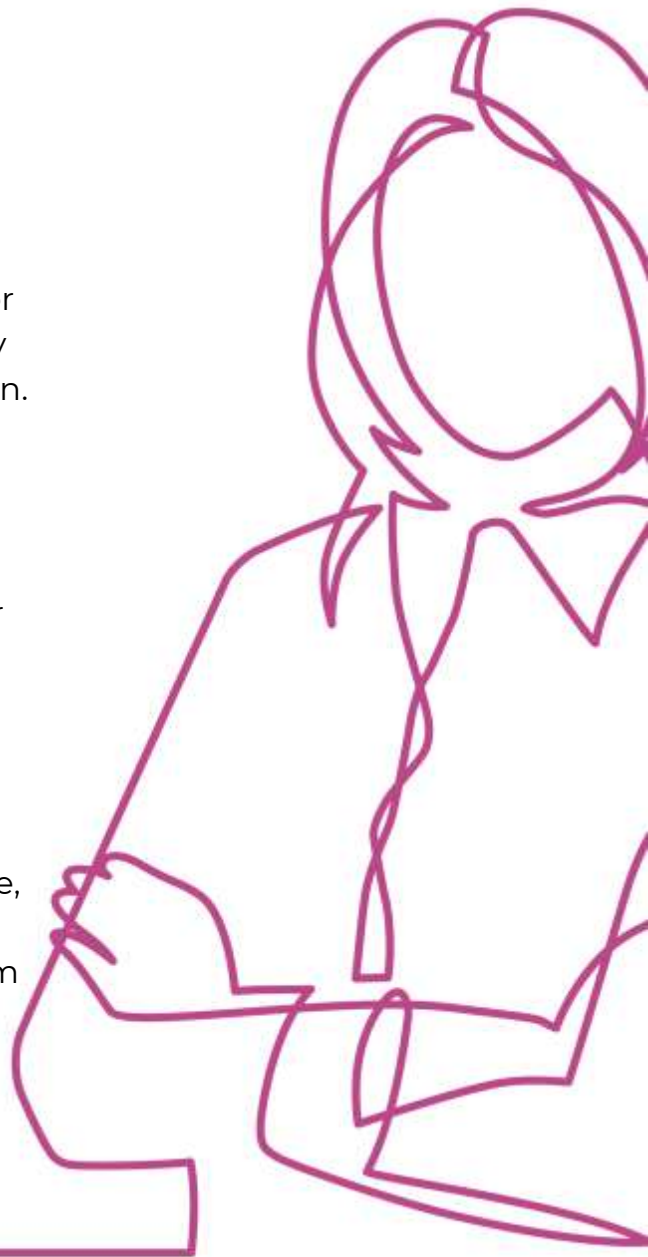
⁴⁸ O'Rourke, C. (2015), '[Gender Principles for Dealing with the Legacy of the Past](#)', Transitional Justice Institute.



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 wellbeing.⁴⁹



⁴⁹ 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.

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.”⁵⁰ This demonstrates clearly the impact that this kind of media coverage has; while the women directly named may have developed a “thick skin,” the young women looking on will often exclude themselves for careers they would otherwise choose because of this scrutiny.

The same research from Girlguiding UK reports that young women are negatively influenced by advertising, in both traditional media and social media, that promotes certain beauty standards and encourages the use of cosmetic surgery, extremely restrictive dieting and similar methods including medically unsafe detox and diet products. With eating disorders on the rise,⁵¹ 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.



⁵⁰ Girlguiding UK (2019), '[Girls' attitudes survey](#)'

⁵¹ Marsh, S. (2019) "[Hospital admissions for eating disorders surge to highest in eight years](#)" The Guardian [article]

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 violence.⁵² 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 plan,⁵³ 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. 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.

⁵² Petter, O. (2019) "[Feminist Group Wins Campaign to Change how Media Reports Domestic Abuse](#)" The Independent [article].

⁵³ Northern Ireland Department of Justice (2020) Gillen Review: [Implementation Plan](#).

Violence Against Women

The WPG welcomes the proposed legislative changes regarding domestic abuse and violence both within the Northern Ireland Assembly and in Westminster Parliament. Activists, women's organisations and support providers have spent many years calling for adequate domestic abuse legislation in Northern Ireland. In the current global pandemic, domestic abuse and violence has sharply increased as many are put at greater risk due to the ongoing government-issued social distancing and lockdown measures. Creating adequate domestic abuse and violence legislation, accompanied by adequate funding provisions, could not be more pertinent than it is right now.

Whilst the quick action to introduce Northern Ireland-specific legislation is to be welcomed, this legislation is now over three years old and it is essential that we learn from the lessons in other jurisdictions and ensure that the women's sector is included in the application and implementation of relevant legislation moving forward. Our full evidence submission, with detailed recommendations relating to the content of the bill, and most significantly, what is missing, can be read [here](#).

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Begin 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.
- * We also recommend that a comprehensive, inclusive programme is developed on sex and relationships education, for all schools and third level institutions.
- * Introduction of Stalking legislation, as well as non-fatal and fatal strangulation legislation (each accompanied by adequate funding provisions)
- * 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.

(continued on next page)



- * Review of the court systems in NI including criminal, civil and family courts
- * Introduce a dedicated Domestic Abuse Commissioner for Northern Ireland (already in post for England and Wales)
- * Secure funding for specialised services and a review of tendering and procurement in relation to domestic violence and abuse services
- * Fully funded programme to raise public awareness of domestic abuse
- * An independent statutory review of family courts in NI to assess how they deal with domestic abuse cases to work towards consistent outcomes across NI.
- * More rigorous and innovative evidence collection approaches to support successful prosecutions including:
 - Use of the Domestic Violence register showing the number of times police have been called to the house, to build a picture of the frequency and nature of abuse (in line with CEDAW Recommendation 35 on gender-based violence),
 - Use of PSNI intelligence and evidence gathered from incidents to build a picture of coercive control as a course of conduct,
 - Use of body worn camera evidence from the scene on each occasion to effectively demonstrate the impact and seriousness of abuse. In parts of England where body worn cameras have been rolled out, there is a marked increase in the severity of sentences for domestic violence related crimes.
- * NI has not fully implemented an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor service nine years after its recommendation; any service to be implemented should be specialised and not gender-neutral and consideration should be given to the introduction of children's IDVAs and making IDVAs mandatory in police stations
- * Create an inter-departmental approach for the implementation and creation of other legislation with the collaboration of the third sector
- * Provide guidance and support (including financial support) to frontline violence against women organisations and refuges, so that the needs of disabled women in danger of domestic abuse are met; including the communication and access needs of disabled women and reasonable adjustments,
- * Create greater flexibility in the provision of care packages, particularly for disabled women trapped in social isolation and in danger from Domestic Abuse,
- * Support particular provisions of support for disabled women in both the Domestic Abuse Bill (for example, the StaySafe East amendments) and through specific support in any miscellaneous bill to follow the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill.

Hate Crimes and Online Abuse

With the recent publication of Judge Marrinan's Northern Ireland Hate Crime Review,⁵⁴ 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. Tackling hate crime should be an immediate priority for the Executive moving forward out of COVID-19. The Women's Policy Group submitted a detailed Hate Crime Legislation Review consultation response which you can read [here](#).

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; 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 harassment.⁵⁵



⁵⁴ Judge Marrinan (2020) '[Hate Crime Legislation in Northern Ireland: Independent Review](#)'

⁵⁵ 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.”⁵⁶ 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 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. In the independent review of hate crime in Northern Ireland, Judge Marrinan acknowledged the issue of hateful abuse online as part of this Review, citing the abuse that many women politicians both in Westminster and locally in the Northern Ireland Assembly have to endure often on a daily basis.

This is a significant issue as it has led to the resignation of a number of women MPs in recent years with obvious impacts for gender equality and ensuring that the voices of women 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. Cara Hunter, SDLP MLA and Deputy Mayor of Derry has been subjected to near-constant “sexual and violent messages and threatening voicemails.” DUP MLA Carla Lockhart said that online abuse was something she had become accustomed to. She explained “any time there's a picture of me on Twitter, no matter what it's connected with, I will have someone picking on my appearance.”



⁵⁶ Sir Tim Berners-Lee (2020) “[Why the web needs to work for women and girls](#),” Web Foundation.

It is important to have the best people involved in Government representing their communities. It is not possible to achieve this if women feel excluded from these positions due to this type of misogyny and online hate. Women make up half the population and their rights and interests cannot be adequately protected unless women are involved in positions of power and in Government.

Misogynistic behaviour of this kind limits women's representation and visibility not just in politics but in other spheres and it is therefore vital that this is tackled. Online abuse against women and girls has specific implications, and often has a specific ferocity and disproportionate volume for racialised women, LGBT+ women, and disabled women. Online abuse against trans women and girls has skyrocketed in the past number of years, fuelled by animosity in the media, lack of political support, and lack of accountability for multinational social media companies.

Summary of Recommendations:

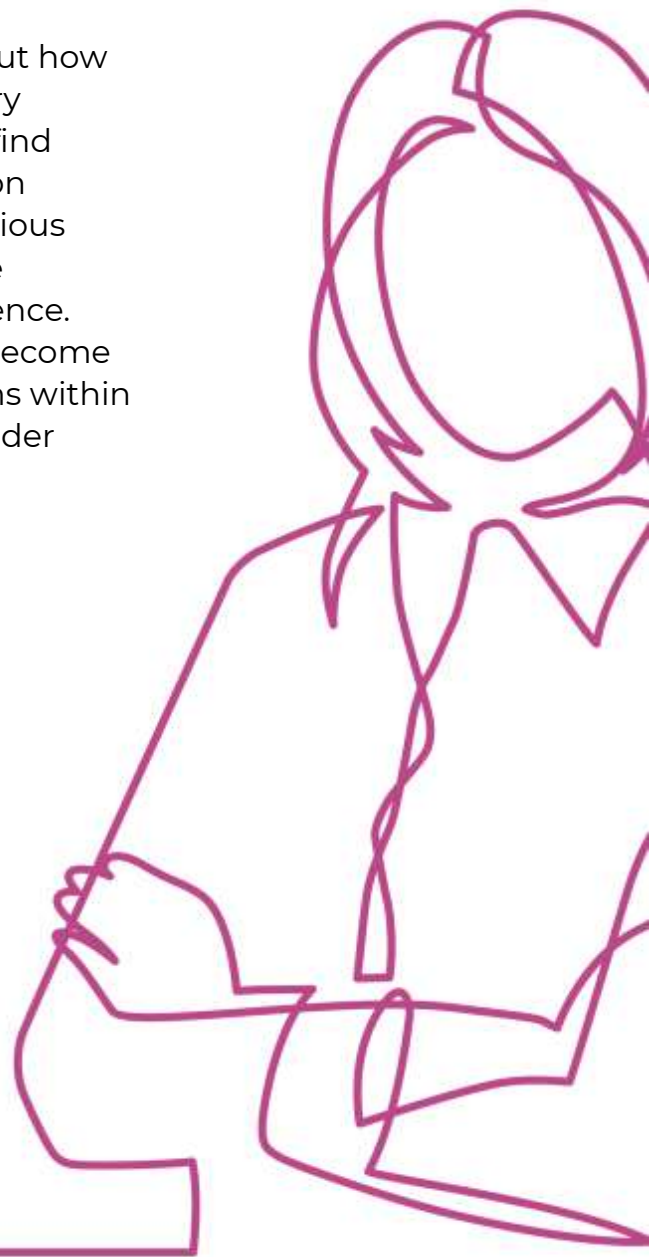
- * Create a consolidated hate crime legislation model for Northern Ireland,
- * Introduce specific guidelines and extensive programmes of training and education on any new model of hate crime legislation; including what the protected characteristics are and the consequences of committing a hate crime,
- * Add equivalent provisions to Sections 4, 4A and 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 to the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987,
- * Strengthen law relating to public authorities tackling hate expressions in public spaces,
- * Implement victim-led restorative justice programmes in collaboration with community-based organisations,
- * Commission extensive research specific to Northern Ireland to tackle the under-reporting of hate crime and mistrust from minorities in reporting services,
- * Adequately fund and expand the Hate Crime Advocacy Scheme
- * 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. 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.”

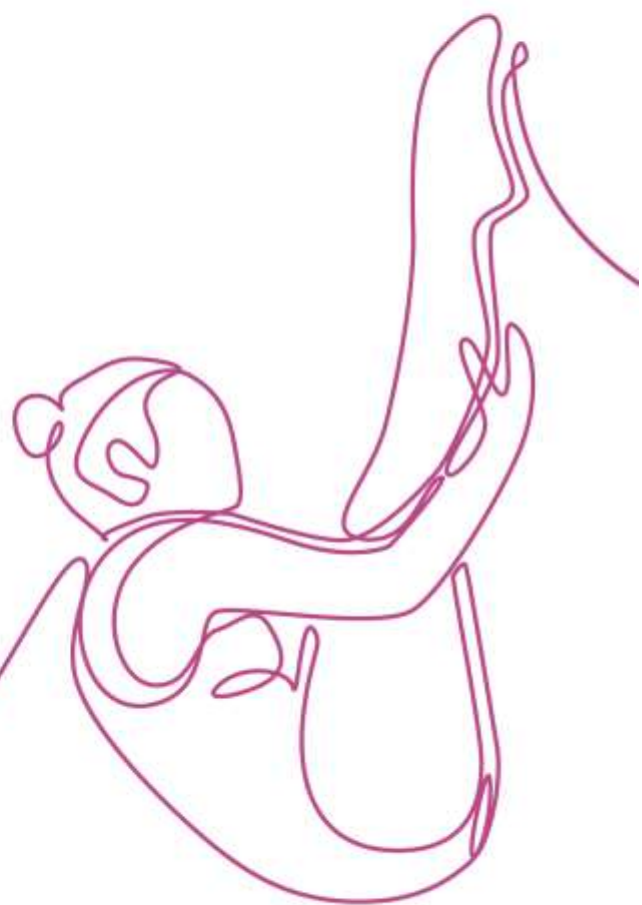
It is also worth noting that the NI Curriculum used in schools today was first introduced in 2007. So much has changed since then, particularly in the past year, that an overhaul could be very beneficial to students.



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.
- * 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.
- * 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:
 - o 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;
 - o 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;
 - o 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;
 - o Ensure there are adequate educational campaigns related to the hate crime legislation review, domestic abuse legislation and all other legislative changes;
 - o Promote human rights education in schools which includes a focus on the empowerment of girls and CEDAW.

Brexit and a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland



Brexit and the Impact on Women: Rights at Risk

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

Many areas of women's human rights have yet to be achieved, and Brexit has added a new threat to existing, hard-fought rights women currently have.

Northern Ireland faces unique constitutional complexities meaning Brexit presents a unique threat to this region.⁵⁷ With women's voices being largely absent from negotiations, at a local, national and EU level, it is necessary to analyse the unique and disproportionate impact Brexit will have on the women of Northern Ireland.

We note the UK Government's commitment to 'no diminution' of certain rights, including equality rights, under Article 2 of the Northern Ireland Protocol.⁵⁸ It has also committed to keeping pace with any EU changes to certain equality laws including particular gender equality laws.⁵⁹ However, there are a number of issues regarding women's rights in the context of Brexit which have yet to be addressed.



⁵⁷ Human Rights Consortium (2018), '[Brexit and Northern Ireland: Rights at Risk Report](#)'

⁵⁸ UK Government (2020) '[UK Government commitment to 'no diminution of rights' in Northern Ireland](#)' [Explainer document]

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Women's Rights Achieved Through EU Membership

Many of the rights we enjoy today have come through membership of the EU over the past four decades; particularly in areas of economic activity and employment law. For women, there are great concerns that Brexit will erode many of these protections. Some of these protections include:⁶⁰ equality between men and women,⁶¹ the right to equal pay for equal work,⁶² protection against discrimination on the ground of pregnancy and maternity,⁶³ introducing measures to provide specific advantages to the underrepresented gender,⁶⁴ prohibition of discriminations on the grounds of sex,⁶⁵ and introduction of paid holidays.⁶⁶

Other areas of EU legislation, representation and funding that are relevant to the protection and enhancement of women's rights and participation include the European Protection order, which is significant in recognising women's rights as they cross the border; the Rural Development Programme;⁶⁷ the European Social Fund (important for increasing women's access to the workforce); and the European Parliamentary Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality.⁶⁸

Missed Opportunities: Current EU Work on Rights

There are many missed future opportunities for the enhancement of rights that would benefit the lives of women in Northern Ireland. For example, as highlighted by the Human Rights Consortium, the EU has also sought to extend parental rights to leave⁶⁹ and encourage better childcare support for families⁷⁰ with the strategic aim of reducing the gender pay gap and

advancing women's rights more generally. Furthermore, as NIRWN have highlighted,⁷¹ there is a new ongoing consultation of trade unions and employers launched at EU level focusing on a new package of rights to improve work-life balance, including proposals for carers' leave, flexible working and stronger protections from dismissal for new mothers.⁷²

⁶⁰ Furthermore, the EU recognises the need for wide-spread structural change to deal with systematic gender discrimination through their commitment to Gender Mainstreaming and the [Gender Recast Directive 2006](#). The Gender Recast Directive covers a range of areas including access to employment, promotion, vocational training schemes and working conditions to ensure the rights of women are considered central to decision making.

⁶¹ The [EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#) (2012)

⁶² [Article 119](#) Treaty (2016) establishing the European Economic Community.

⁶³ This is still an issue in Northern Ireland today: Equality Commission Northern Ireland (2016) ["Expecting Equality: A Formal Investigation into the Treatment of Pregnant Workers and Mothers in NI Workplaces."](#)

⁶⁴ Ibid. 49.

⁶⁵ Sex and other grounds for discrimination are covered in Article 21, EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (Ibid. 49).

⁶⁶ NIRWN (2018) [Rural Voices Report](#), p.30: 'Many of the two million workers who had no paid holiday before the Working Time Directive, were part-time working women'; Human Rights Consortium (2018) [Rights at Risk Report](#), p. 75.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 54 (NIRWN 'Rural Voices Report' 2018)

⁶⁸ Alongside various EU funding streams that support the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland.

⁶⁹ EU Council (2010) [Directive 2010/18/EU](#) implementing the revised Framework Agreement on parental leave (8th March 2010)

⁷⁰ European Commission (2013) ["Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage"](#) Recommendations.

⁷¹ Ibid. 54., p.30.

⁷² Trades Union Congress (TUC) (2016) ["Women Workers' Rights and the Risks of Brexit"](#)

It is worth noting that the EU did not recognise care work as an economic activity, which meant carers did not have the same equal status of those who were workers, self-employed or seeking residency under the freedom of movement within EU member states. As women undertake the majority of caring responsibilities in Northern Ireland, they were disproportionately impacted by this approach. It is evident that women in Northern Ireland are in line to face the brunt of the impact of Brexit. The UK Women's Budget Group maintains that women will be adversely impacted by the economic impacts of Brexit.⁷³ This can only get worse for women in Northern Ireland, who have greatly suffered from the past decade of austerity and are deeply concerned about the impact of welfare reform⁷⁴ and future austerity on gender equality.⁷⁵

In particular, the economic consequences of Brexit are set to have disproportionately negative impacts on rural women, disabled women, LGBTQ+ women, women of colour, women living on the border, migrant women, as they lose many human rights protections and funding streams supporting their participation and empowerment.

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

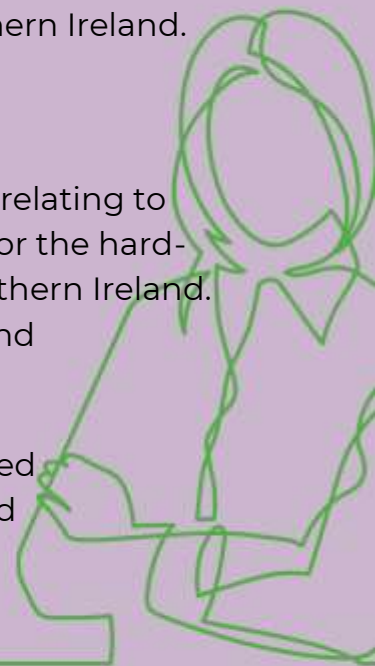
Summary of Recommendations:

- * A gendered approach must be taken towards all policy making relating to Brexit; for equal representation of women in negotiations; and for the hard-won EU rights for women to be protected and enhanced in Northern Ireland.
- * NI continues post Brexit to learn from EU policy development and innovation in order to replicate what is advantageous to NI.
- * Balance recommendations for greater food self-reliance with recognition of the gendered, unpaid and low-paid labour involved in producing and providing food, particularly as Northern Ireland may be impacted by differing food standards post-Brexit.

⁷³ UK Women's Budget Group (2017) '[Economic Impact of Brexit on Women](#)'

⁷⁴ Harding, S. (2019) '[Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives](#)', Women's Regional Consortium

⁷⁵ NIWEP (2018) 'Women and Gender Equality in a Changing Europe: A roundtable to explore women's priorities in Brexit' [Unpublished]



International Best Practice



Northern Ireland Women's European Platform - International Outlook

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

The plan is structured on the understanding that the COVID-19 crisis has not created new gender inequalities, but has highlighted and deepened existing inequalities, which are perpetuated by current economic models.⁷⁶

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



⁷⁶ European Women's Lobby (2020) "[Women must not pay the price for COVID-19!](#)" Policy Brief.

Summary of Recommendations:

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



The Purple Pact: Economics that Work for Women

The European Women's Lobby (EWL) proposals for COVID-19 recovery draw from The Purple Pact,⁷⁷ 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.

Key issues within existing economic models that work against gender equality:

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

⁷⁷ European Women's Lobby (2020) "[The Purple Pact](#): A Feminist Approach to the Economy"

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,
- * 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.



Initiatives at UN Level

The UN Global Compact⁷⁸ 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 better.⁷⁹ These include a brief on gender equality,⁸⁰ 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
- Honour existing contracts with women-owned businesses, support their recovery and engage with them as supply chains are re-established.
- 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.

⁷⁸ [UN Global Impact](#) Support for Businesses Resource [Website]

⁷⁹ UN Global Impact (2020) [20th Anniversary Campaign](#) [Website]

⁸⁰ 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 of Finance. 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 of Finance works with other NI Departments to tackle the issues raised in this report.** As a matter of urgency, the Department should:

- * Use gender budgeting to inform all economic decision-making and encourage other Departments to do the same.
- * Meaningfully engage with women's sector organisations in the drafting of the upcoming government budget (2021).
- * Ensure the women's sector is sustainably funded; recognising the important role it plays in ensuring women's safety and equality in society.
- * Carefully consider the gendered impacts of all policies and take action to mitigate against any potential adverse impacts.