



Women's
Policy Group NI

NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan

Recommendations:

The Executive Office

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Abstract

The evidence and contents of this report contain recommendations specific to the Executive Office, taken from the NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan, which was published by the Women's Policy Group in July 2020. The Feminist Recovery Plan highlights the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women, as well as the implications of Brexit and a Bill of Rights on women and girls in Northern Ireland, 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 Executive Office will not have direct responsibility for all issues raised in this report, they have been included as we believe an inter-departmental approach is essential to tackling the issues raised.

Further, a number of issues in this report may be specific to other Departments, but require approval from the Executive Office. Therefore, these issues should be brought to the attention of the Department.



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

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented challenge across the UK. It has put in sharp focus the value and importance of care work, paid and unpaid, and highlighted the essential nature of often precarious and almost always low paid retail work. Women undertake the majority of this work, and women will bear a particular brunt of this crisis; economically, socially and in terms of health. In this way, the current crisis affects men and women differently, and in many cases deepens the inequalities women experience on an everyday basis. These inequalities, along with key solutions, were highlighted in a Women's Manifesto issued by the WPG in preparation for the general election in December 2019. These solutions remain central for a long-term response, but the developing crisis has put a number of issues in sharp focus for urgent emergency action.

The WPG Feminist Recovery Plan analyses the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in Northern Ireland in terms of economic justice, health, social justice and cultural inequality. In addition to this, implications of Brexit and the need for a Bill of Rights will be examined, and an analysis of international best practice case studies will be done. This plan will use a mix of political and economic policy-making recommendations to advocate for a feminist recovery to COVID-19, with the aim of not only avoiding deepening gender inequalities through recovery planning, but also tackling the gendered inequalities that already exist in our society. The WPG is calling on decision-makers across the UK to take action to ensure a gender-sensitive crisis response as we transition from crisis response to recovery. We recognise that some issues highlighted in the full WPG Feminist Recovery Plan will be of a devolved nature for the Northern Ireland Assembly, others will be issues that require Westminster intervention.

Women's Policy Group NI

Women's Policy Group (WPG) NI: Introduction

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

The WPG is endorsed as a voice that represents all women of Northern Ireland on a policy level. This group has collective expertise on protected characteristics and focus on identifying the intersectional needs of all women. The WPG membership is broad and has a deep understanding of how best to approach the impact COVID-19 is having on women in Northern Ireland.



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

The Feminist Recovery Plan was prepared by:

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

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

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

Based on the evidence outlined in each section of the Plan, recommendations will be made for gender-responsive budgeting and policy-making to both the NI Assembly and UK governments. The Feminist Recovery plan advocates for a feminist recovery to COVID-19, with the aim of not only avoiding deepening gender inequalities through recovery planning, but also tackling the gendered inequalities that already exist in our society.



Economic Justice Pillar



A Feminist Green Economy

The NI Executive committed 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 agreement¹.

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

The recommendations included in the WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan would support the NI Executive in meeting the requirements set out in New Decade, New Approach, whilst applying a gender lens to support a care economy and gender equality in any new green economy. Commitments made by the NI Executive include:

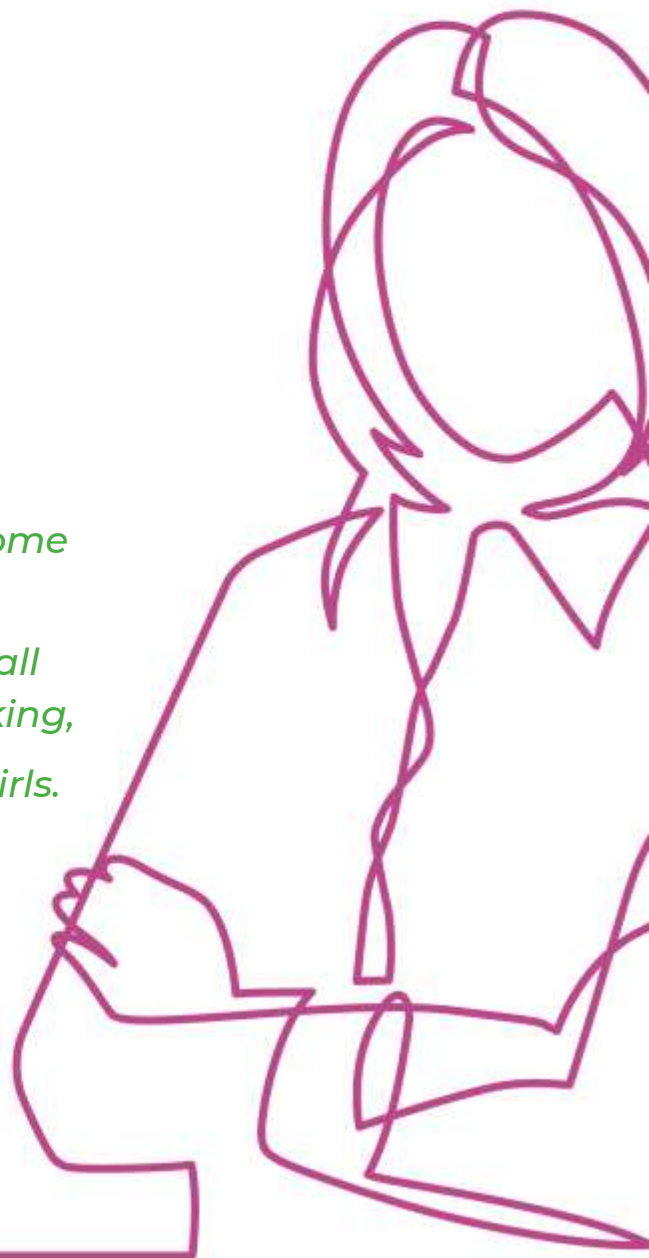
- The Executive’s strategies to reduce carbon emissions will be reviewed in light of the Paris Climate Change Accord and the climate crisis.
- A new Energy Strategy will set ambitious targets and actions for a fair and just transition to a zero carbon society.
- The Executive should bring forward a Climate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



¹ [New Decade, New Approach Agreement \(2020\)](#), p.8

In particular, the WPG would like to make reference to aims for a “fair and just transition” alongside the Economic Strategy that will “support clean and inclusive growth and create jobs as part of a Green New Deal”. The Women’s Policy Group NI endorses the UK Women’s Budget Group and Women’s Environmental Network paper for the WBG Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, ‘Towards a Feminist Green New Deal for the UK’². This paper looks at a Green New Deal from an intersectional feminist perspective³, and it is an approach that the WPG would endorse for Northern Ireland in relation to our economic recovery and the NI Executive’s aims for tackling climate change. The paper outlines some key points regarding what a Feminist Green New Deal should aim to achieve:

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



² Cohen, M. and MacGregor, S. (2020), ‘[Towards a Feminist Green New Deal for the UK: A Paper for the WBG Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy](#)’, UK Women’s Budget Group and Women’s Environmental Network

³ Taking an intersectional feminist approach means taking into consideration the various ways in which different aspects of a woman’s social identity can overlap and compound the nature and severity of gender discrimination she faces. For example, women from minority ethnic backgrounds will experience gender discrimination differently than white women; with issues of racial inequality and gender inequality overlapping and compounding one another. More information on this can be found [here](#).

The WPG would add that in the context of Northern Ireland, the need for women's involvement in peacebuilding processes should also be a priority, as set out in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security⁴.

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, as part of a Green New Deal for Northern Ireland. NI 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 levels of harm to our social, health, economic and environmental infrastructures.

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Encourage women and girls into male-dominated green sectors that are encouraged through a Northern Ireland Green New Deal.
- * Recognising the dual-benefit job creation and increased tax revenue through investing in paid care work (a key sustainable industry); work that is already done in an unpaid capacity by majority women,

(continued on next page)



⁴ United Nations (2000) Security Council: [Resolution 1325](#) (UNSCR 1325), Women, Peace and Security.

- * 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,
- * Promoting economic, ecological and carbon education campaigns for schools and the wider public, adequately funded through a Climate Change Act and within the Programme for Government,
- * Ensure equality impact assessments of all environmental policies and ensure consultation on policies with groups representing various genders, races and classes within civil society,
- * Make socio-economic equality of protected characteristics a key goal of any new green new deal framework and ensure co-design of planning and policies with the Women's Sector,
- * Promote a cultural shift towards valuing care as a key part of the infrastructure of the environment and economy.
- * Protect human rights, including sexual rights, reproductive rights, and working rights,
- * Promote trade justice within supply chains and create ethical procurement guidelines in line with the above recommendations.



Paramilitarism, Gate Keeping and Control of Funding

Paramilitarism is a reality in Northern Ireland, and continues to be a significant issue despite it being almost 23 years since the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was signed. The reality of our history means that it is difficult to draw a line under the legacy of the violence of the past and those who were involved with it, but this does not mean that efforts to do so should cease. **Paramilitary organisations continue to exist, despite, in most cases, ceasefires being in place and the conflict being behind us.**

Further, many of those who are involved in paramilitary activity are not the same actors that were involved during the conflict, and the activities that continue to come under the umbrella name of “paramilitary activity” are not the same as those carried out during the conflict. Evidently, these organisations continue to recruit new members, and to engage in activities that would ordinarily be categorised as **common criminality; loan-sharking, protection rackets, and drug dealing.**

Justice Minister, Naomi Long, has signalled her intention to introduce Unexplained Wealth Orders; however, this legislation is yet to be put in place. This would be a welcome change, but it is vital that these Orders are used properly and wherever appropriate to tackle paramilitarism. Another, and arguably more difficult barrier, is the concern that there may be a lack of political will to truly uproot the paramilitary organisations behind some of this criminality.

Paramilitary run organisations continue to act as community organisations within many vulnerable communities and many are in receipt of public money. These same community workers and organisations can act as gatekeepers within their communities, choosing favoured organisations to work alongside and choking off support to groups that may challenge or question paramilitary influence.

These organisations are often highly male-dominated, leading to the silencing of women's voices within the local community and reinforcing gender divisions.

This problem has been further exacerbated by the UK's refusal to apply UNSCR 1325 to the Northern Ireland conflict. The Paramilitary Crime Task Force has arrested multiple individuals, but has not been able to stamp out the organisations themselves. More robust action against these organisations would actually free up money to be invested in the communities that are currently being harmed by this coercive control, many of which have some of the worst levels of deprivation in the UK, and even in Europe.

Summary of Recommendations:

- * More robust and routine checks on the bona fides of community organisations to screen out those with active involvement in ongoing paramilitary and/or criminal activity.
- * Support the introduction and implementation of Unexplained Wealth Orders legislation in Northern Ireland.
- * Increased efforts to tackle issues of loan-sharking, which are prevalent among paramilitary groups. These issues particularly impact upon those with limited incomes, such as women; who are more likely to be in precarious or part-time employment, and on average earn less per year than men.

Additional Sections from:

Economic Justice Pillar



Although the following sections from the Economic Justice Pillar are not of specific relevance to the Executive Office, they have been included in this report as they require an inter-departmental approach, and should be brought to the attention of the Department.

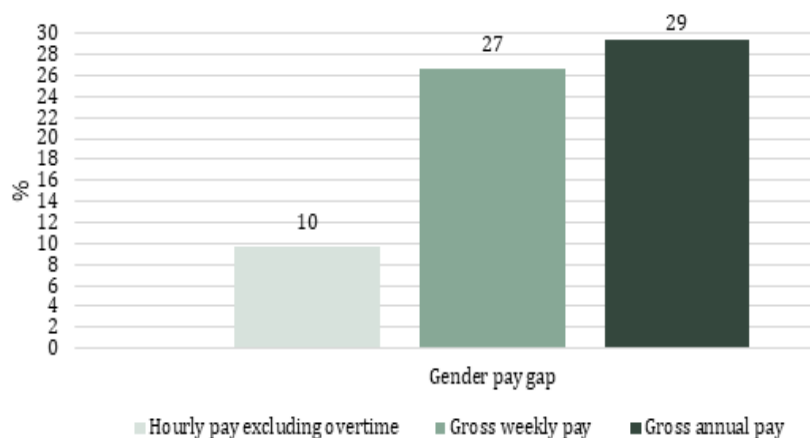
Women's Employment and Gender Pay Gap Reporting

Women in Northern Ireland continue to be more likely to be in insecure and part-time employment, and whilst the overall gender pay gap in NI is the lowest in the UK, women still earn on average around 9.6% less than men⁵. Having dependent children significantly amplifies this difference and women responsible for dependent children are more likely to be in insecure, part time work. Policy failures around family-leave frameworks fail all workers but impact disproportionately on women while the lack of affordable childcare, structured to facilitate women returning and staying in work, is still a very significant issue. Furthermore, women continue to experience significant sex discrimination, including sexual harassment and discrimination against mothers and pregnant women.

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

Gross weekly earnings are 27% below that of men, whilst gross annual earnings are almost 30% below that of men.

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



Source: *Better Work, Better Lives Report*⁶

⁵ PwC (2019) ['Women in Work Index: Summary'](#); which analyses female economic empowerment in the UK

⁶ ICTU (2019) ['Better Work, Better Lives: Childcare in Northern Ireland'](#) Policy Report.

The European Trade Union Confederation estimates that if women were paid the same as men, the poverty rate among working women could be halved and 2.5 million children would come out of poverty. Having one or more children reduces a woman's likelihood of being in a permanent, full-time job by almost one-third, with only 45% of women with one or more children working in a permanent, full-time job. Fewer than 1 in 3 women with no dependent children work part-time. This compares to almost 1 in 2 women with dependent children who are employed on a part-time basis. Women with dependent children work an average of 11 hours less per week than men with dependent children. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown into stark relief the totally inadequate childcare support system in Northern Ireland, a system which sees childcare as an individual responsibility rather than a public good.

Sex discrimination in the workplace continues to be a shockingly common occurrence. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland estimates that around 25% of the queries they get to their legal helpline relate to potential sex discrimination at work. Of these, they estimate that 21.5% are to do with pregnancy or maternity⁷. The issues raised are not confined to any particular sector and it is happening regardless of the level, type or grade of job held by women. Sex discrimination at work is not an isolated phenomenon, and is closely connected to rates of domestic violence in society.



⁷ ECNI (2019), '[Pregnancy and Maternity Discrimination Remains an Issue for Working Mothers](#)', Equality Commission NI

Domestic violence creates a negative spillover effect on the world of work, as recognised by the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) and its accompanying Recommendation (No. 206). The Preamble to the Convention notes that "domestic violence can affect employment, productivity and health and safety, and that governments, employers' and workers' organizations and labour market institutions can help, as part of other measures, to recognize, respond to and address the impacts of domestic violence". As such, the Convention requires Members to:

"take appropriate measures to ... recognize the effects of domestic violence and, so far as is reasonably practicable, mitigate its impact in the world of work" (Art. 10(f)).

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

A survey conducted by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in 2019⁸ found shockingly high levels of sexual harassment at work. ICTU surveyed more than 600 trade union members in Northern Ireland with experience of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the workplace and in line with international evidence, found that women were more likely to be victims of sexual harassment and men perpetrators. The survey also found that 75% of workers experiencing sexual harassment at work did not report the incident to their employer while of those who did report, 62% felt that it was not dealt with satisfactorily and in some instances reported that they had been treated less favourably as a result of reporting sexual harassment.

In June 2019, at the Centenary Conference of the International Labour Organization (ILO)⁹, the Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) and its accompanying Recommendation (No. 206) were adopted. The global community has made it clear that violence and harassment in the world of work will not be tolerated and must end.



⁸ ICTU (2019), '[NIC-ICTU survey reveals shockingly high levels of under-reporting of sexual harassment at work](#)'.

⁹ ILO, '[Eliminating Violence and Harassment in the World of Work](#)'.

Summary of Recommendations:

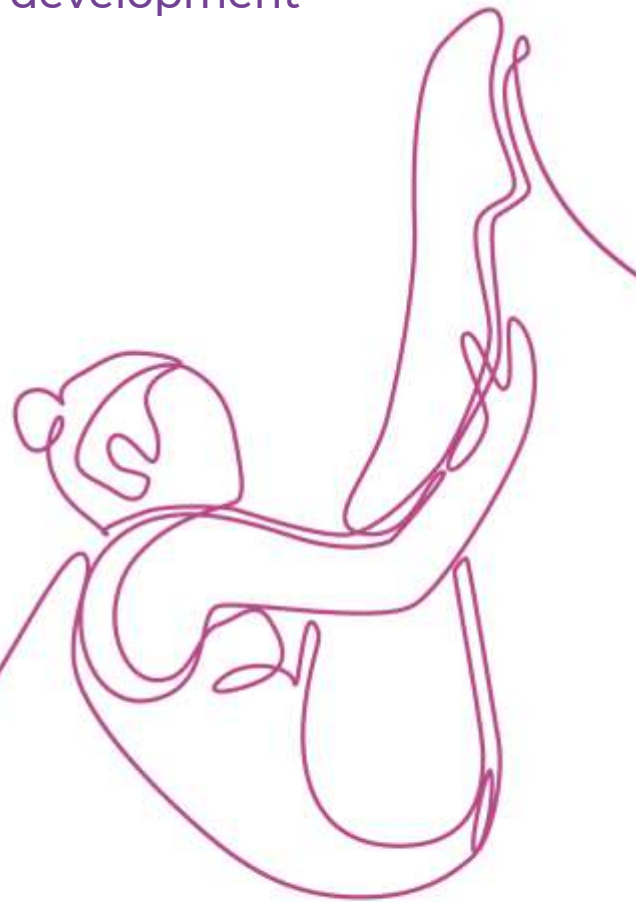
- * Introduce a duty on employers to proactively tackle sexual harassment at work to include mandatory training for all employees including managers and HR personnel.
- * Develop a women's employment strategy which identifies the labour market issues facing women and an associated cross departmental action plan to tackle these.
- * Introduce Gender Pay Gap legislation which is fit for purpose for Northern Ireland. Ensure that this is accompanied by an associated strategy, action plan and accountability measures which should be properly resourced.
- * Introduce gender transparency measures to tackle inequality in men's and women's pay and pensions.
- * One of the measures the European Trade Union Confederation recommends to achieve equal pay is a comprehensive Gender Pay Transparency Directive to create more openness about pay and pay inequalities. This should include measures to:
 - Ban pay secrecy clauses in contracts so that workers can discuss pay,
 - Require information for job evaluation for the purpose of establishing equal pay for equal work,
 - Make all employers produce pay information (audits) and annual action plans on pay equality,
 - Support unions to negotiate with employers to tackle the pay gap,
 - Require job advertisements to include the pay scale,
 - Prevent employers hiding behind privacy, data protection or administrative burden to avoid pay transparency,
 - Ensure transparency for the whole pay package including benefits, bonuses, pensions, allowances etc,
 - Impose sanctions on employers who do not take action.
- * Review flexible working legislation and make this available as a day one right for all workers.
- * Make parental leave available as a day one right, introduce 10 days of paid parental leave.
- * Reserve a period of paid parental leave for fathers – use it or lose it.



Gender Segregated Labour Markets & Care Work

When the income of men and women across occupations ranging from the lowest hourly paid to the highest hourly paid is examined, it is apparent that women dominate in the low paid occupations. What is more, across the vast majority of occupations there remains a substantive gender pay gap, with women continuing to earn less pay per hour than men. This gender pay gap is likely to worsen due to the economic impact of COVID-19, which not only has negative consequences for women, but the economy as a whole. Findings from the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report 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”



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 year¹⁰; whilst unpaid carers across all the UK provide social care worth £57 billion per year¹¹.

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

What has become clear, is that care work, which is predominantly undertaken by women and girls, is central to the functions of every economy; yet it is still treated as a private issue and undervalued as contributors to economies.

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

¹⁰ Carers NI (2015), '[NI Carers save government £4.6 billion a year](#)'; see also: Carers NI (2017) '[State of Caring 2017](#)'

¹¹ Office for National Statistics (2017), '[Unpaid carers provide social care worth £57 billion](#)'

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Monitor gender parity in the professions of the future.
- * Promote conciliation measures and actions finalised to increase equal opportunities in both education and work¹². For example, introduce family policies, social protection systems and measures aimed at reducing gender inequalities, and encourage higher education and job opportunities for women.
- * Analyse the economic value of putting money into caring, which will help carers get back into paid employment and thus improve their health and financial wellbeing and consequently reduce pressure on the health and benefits systems in the long-run.
- * For a better, more resilient economy, care work must be recognised as a valued job. This means making sure it pays well, attracts investment in education and training, and provides opportunities for promotion.
- * Require all workplaces to record and publish gender segregation and gender pay gap data.
- * Sustainably fund the women's sector so that no woman is left in danger.
- * Require employers to report the numbers of people made redundant with breakdowns by gender and other protected characteristics.
- * Require the re-initiation (or implementation in the NI context) of gender pay gap reporting; including reporting on pay gaps during the COVID-19 lockdown.
- * Design a sustainable and stable social care system which is free to the point of use for all citizens, with well paid, well trained permanent staff and funded via general taxation.

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¹² Rosalia Castellane et. al. (2019), '[Analyzing the gender gap in European labour markets at the NUTS-1 level](#)', Cogent Social Sciences Vol 5. 2019 Iss. 1.

- * Introduce policies to encourage sharing of care and unpaid work between women and men.
- * Provide better information and advice for carers, forward planning, and support so that there is a reliable and sustainable care economy which is fit for purpose.
- * NI Assembly should promote awareness of the important role of unpaid carers and caring, and introduce more concrete support so that value is recognised practically.
- * Significant increase in funding for the health and social care system to allow services to rebuild after the crisis, alongside bringing forward plans for long-term reform of social care.
- * The UK Government and NI Assembly should immediately increase the basic level of Carer's Allowance, and a one-off coronavirus Supplement to those entitled to Carer's Allowance of £20 a week to match the rise in Universal Credit.
- * Greater consistency is needed in connecting carers to support available to look after their own mental and physical health and wellbeing.
- * Employers, and the NI Assembly, should ensure that there are carer-friendly policies in place that enable working carers to balance their caring responsibilities with work.
- * Schools, colleges and universities should be encouraged to introduce policies and programmes that support carers and improve their experience of education.



Women's Poverty and Austerity

The response to the 2008 financial crash was a programme of austerity and welfare reform. Research suggests that these policies had a disproportionate impact on women showing that 86% of the savings to the Treasury from the tax and benefit changes since 2010 have come from women.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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 year¹⁵. Before the pandemic, women were already more likely to

experience poverty; however, in the current climate, job losses and the need to provide increasing levels of unpaid care are likely to increase poverty and dependence on social security benefits, especially for women. Women make up the majority of Universal Credit claimants, a figure which has risen significantly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- * The first eight weeks of the pandemic saw an 80% increase in claimants (between 1st March and 26th April 2020)
- * Between 13th March 2020 and 14th May 2020, there were 2.4 million new applicants to Universal Credit
- * As of 9th July 2020, there were 5.6 million people on Universal Credit in total; a figure which will continue to increase as the economic consequences of the pandemic continue to be felt¹⁶.



¹³ Cracknell, R., and Keen, R. (2017) "Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes" [Commons Briefing Papers](#) SN06758,

¹⁴ Institute for Social and Economic Research (2020) [Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study](#), COVID-19 Survey, Briefing Note, University of Essex.

¹⁵ Black, J. (2020) ["Coronavirus crisis sees demand for foodbanks in Northern Ireland soar"](#), Belfast Telegraph [article]

¹⁶ Women's Regional Consortium (2020) ["The Impact of Universal Credit on Women"](#) funded by the Department for Communities (DfC) and Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

The Women's Budget Group (WBG) has urged the Government not to turn to austerity measures to pay for the cost of the crisis. The WBG stressed that this will repeat the past and impact poor, Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and disabled women the most. The WBG has suggested a range of alternative ways to pay for the measures needed including investment in social infrastructure to boost the economy, increased taxes on wealth and tackling tax evasion, avoidance and havens.¹⁷

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Direct payments in lieu of school meals should continue until all children are fully back to school.
- * Increase the level of Child Benefit to £50 per child per week to help poorer families stay out of poverty and reflect the additional costs facing parents.
- * Increases in the standard allowances for Universal Credit and Tax Credits by £20 are to be welcomed but the Government should mirror these increases to households on legacy benefits also.
- * As Universal Credit is one of the key benefits for those who have lost their jobs or suffered significantly reduced income a range of changes are required to help ensure it better supports people:
 - o The basic levels of Universal Credit should be increased in line with real living wages indefinitely to support those who have lost their jobs.
 - o At the very least Government should hold on to the increase in the standard allowance to help people get back on their feet while we go in and out of lockdowns.
 - o The five-week wait should be removed. If this does not happen then Advance Payments should be converted from loans to grants to ensure people are supported to get through the five-week wait without risking hardship or getting into debt.
 - o In Northern Ireland consideration should be given to providing an automatic grant from the Universal Credit Contingency Fund for all those claiming Universal Credit for the first time.

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¹⁷ Women's Budget Group (WBG) (2020) '[Easing Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women](#)' [Briefing Paper]

- Extend the suspension of benefit deductions to include Universal Credit Advance Payments.
- Amend the Universal Credit Regulations so that Maternity Allowance is treated in the same way as Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP).
- * Scrap the two-child limit in Tax Credits and Universal Credit which would help to protect against an increase in child poverty, and consider providing an additional mitigation payment for families who have children and who are impacted by the two-child limit as suggested by the CliffEdge NI Coalition.
- * The Benefit Cap mitigation should be extended to new claimants. The pandemic means that increasing numbers of claimants will be subject to the benefit cap as a result of losing their jobs. Extending the Benefit Cap mitigation to new claimants will ensure people can access adequate levels of financial support during this period and beyond.
- * Increase the budget for Discretionary Support, remove the income ceiling, extend the eligibility criteria and make more payments as grants rather than loans.
- * Continue the pause for deductions for benefit debts (without pausing deductions for child maintenance).



Increasing Debt

We are already dealing with a debt crisis, but the Coronavirus pandemic will add many more people to the numbers in debt and in need of help to resolve problem debts. This increasing level of debt has the potential to stifle economic recovery and means that debt advice agencies will be inundated when the impact of the crisis on people's personal finances becomes evident in the coming months. 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.¹⁸

¹⁸ StepChange (2020) "[Coronavirus and personal debt: a financial recovery strategy for households](#)"

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

Before the pandemic, research by the Women's Regional Consortium¹⁹ on women's access to lending showed that 87% of the women involved in the research needed to borrow money in the last three years. Most had little or no savings or the ability to save due to low income or living on benefits. Other pre-crisis Office of National Statistics (ONS) data²⁰ shows that women are consistently more vulnerable to poverty.

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.



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

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

Single parents are likely to be particularly affected by this and, in Northern Ireland, the majority of single parent households are headed by a woman (91%).²¹ An alarming 42% of single parents are anticipating living on less than £500 per month²², due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Debt advice agencies report that single parents may be particularly vulnerable to debt as they are more likely to be in low-paid

and part-time work, as well as disproportionately impacted by welfare reform and increases in the cost of living. StepChange reports that single parents are over-represented amongst their debt clients compared to the UK population. Single parents made up 23% of their clients in 2018 yet represent only 6% of the UK population.

For a variety of reasons including low-incomes, job losses, reductions in working hours and caring commitments, this pandemic will cause many women to suffer financial hardship and debt. There are a range of actions which should be taken to provide protection against hardship and debt coming out of this pandemic. While the costs of implementing these actions may act as a barrier, the costs of not taking action will ultimately be much higher.

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

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

Summary of Recommendations:

Although these issues are primarily the concern of the Department for Communities, as well as the UK government, the Executive Office should be made aware of these recommendations as they reflect urgent major changes that are needed in Northern Ireland as a result of the pandemic.

- * Households struggling with arrears and debt should be provided with strong protections against unaffordable repayment demands and housing insecurity. Government should extend the existing (time-limited) protections and forbearance measures on a range of credit repayments, benefit debt repayments and in housing (including mortgage holidays, increases in Local Housing Allowance rates, extending notice to quit periods, etc).
- * 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).
- * Providing short-term relief on debt repayments and evictions is not enough and, in many cases, will simply defer arrears until a later date. Government should establish a central fund to enable grants for those households negatively impacted by Coronavirus to address arrears and debts accumulated to pay for essential costs during the crisis. The fund should be reserved for the worst affected where realistic chances of repayment may not exist.
- * 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.
- * Many people will have turned to high-cost credit to make ends meet since the crisis began. Financial support through the benefits system and through crisis payments is central to preventing crisis borrowing but the need for alternatives to high-cost credit is more pressing than ever. Government should work with charities, financial institutions and other investors to introduce or underwrite the development of schemes to provide low or no interest loans to help those on the lowest incomes access affordable credit.

Childcare

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

This is fundamental to facilitating women's participation and ability to access paid work, education and training and progressing gender equality in paid and unpaid work. Women are more likely to be forced to care for children, either in addition to their work, or instead of paid work. This applies particularly to parents of disabled children, as childcare options are extremely limited even in ordinary circumstances. This increases the risk of poverty and is also likely to have health impacts for parents.

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.

The Women's Policy Group supports the Childcare for All Campaign and believes that a universal, free and high quality childcare provision, which meets the diverse needs of children, is essential for economic recovery in Northern Ireland.



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

To do this, an adequate childcare provision is crucial. It is extremely concerning that the issue of access to childcare was completely absent from the NI Executive Roadmap to recovery; an alarming omission that was also the case in the UK and Ireland recovery roadmaps. *Access to childcare is a key part of our economic infrastructure and it is necessary for people to be able to return to work place settings, and for those working from home, and is a key component to any pathway to recovery.* It will not be possible to transition to a stage where the lockdown is fully lifted without childcare being treated as a major factor in being able to do this²³.

Research suggests that *as many as 10,000 childcare settings may be unable to reopen after COVID-19*, with roughly 75% blaming financial difficulties for this and 25% referencing fears of parents being able to afford or need the childcare they had previously employed²⁴. Research from the Nevin Economic Research Institute found that despite the fact that *40% of families in Northern Ireland (around 350,000 workers) have dependent children*, little consideration appears to be given to the misalignment between the reopening of many sectors of our economy while childcare options remain extremely limited²⁵. 47% of families in Northern Ireland rely on support from other family members for childcare to enable them to access the workforce²⁶.

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

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

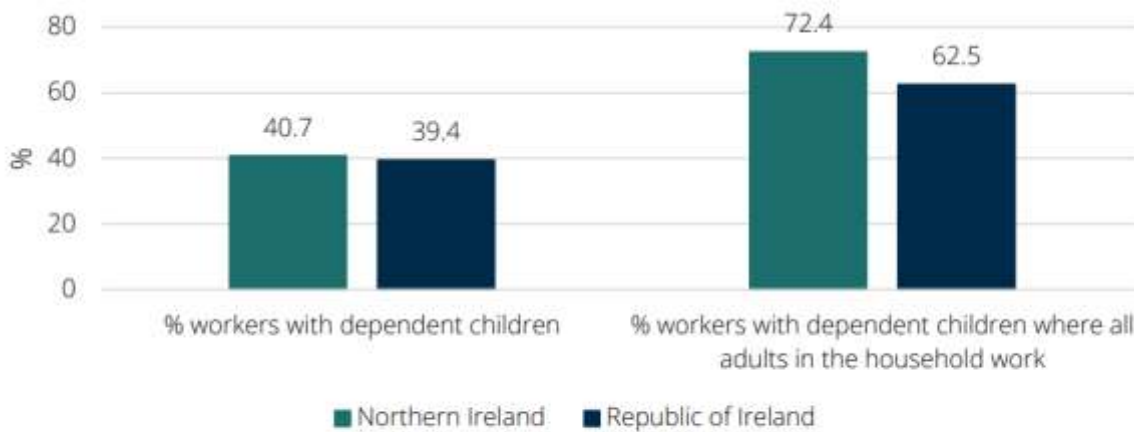
²⁴ Adams, R. (2020), 'UK childcare industry 'crushed' by coronavirus crisis', The Guardian [article], see also: Berry, C. (2020), 'If we need childcare to reopen the UK economy, why is it so undervalued?', The Guardian [article].

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

²⁶ Ibid, p.5.

Figure 15 from NERI compares the situation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Figure 15: Employment and Dependent Children in NI and ROI



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

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

Research from the Fawcett Society, UK Women's Budget Group and academics also suggests that half of parents with young children are struggling to make ends meet, and women key workers face significantly more anxiety and under pressure to work²⁷. The lack of an adequate childcare provision in Northern Ireland, means that women will continue to face barriers to accessing work, education and training. and more women will have to work outside the home, or struggle with unemployment. These barriers are exacerbated by the rising cost of childcare provision in Northern Ireland.



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

Research from the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey in 2019²⁸ shows that the average cost of a full-time childcare place is £166 per week or £8,632 per year. This is an increase of 11% since 2010 when the first NI Childcare Survey was conducted.

Furthermore, 50% of families report spending more than 20% of their overall household income on childcare (this rises to 63% for lone parents) and 41% of families resorted to means other than their income to pay for their childcare needs, including savings, an overdraft, loans and credit cards (this rises to 51% for lone parents).

More than 50% of people in Northern Ireland think there is a lack of sufficient childcare in their area, and 45% of mothers attributed a change in their working hours to the cost of childcare. The WPG believes that childcare should be treated as a key part of our economic infrastructure and a public good, rather than a private family matter, that is preventing many women from working.

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

“reversing decades of progress women have made in the labour market, and increasing the gender pay gap - as well as having a damaging impact on our national economic productivity.”³⁰



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

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

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

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

“Women with caring responsibilities and those returning from maternity leave are at higher risk of being unfairly targeted for redundancy and dismissal due to difficulties with their childcare...”

The Equality and Human Rights Commission have already warned that pregnant women and new mums face being made redundant during the crisis due to discrimination... BME and disabled women also face intersecting barriers to equal participation in the labour market that prevent them from accessing and thriving in the labour market fairly, and additional difficulties accessing childcare could intensify and damage the discrimination they face [...]

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

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

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

³⁵ Ibid. 27, p.4.

In relation to workers in the childcare sector, there are major concerns relating to the attitudes of undervaluing care work through the underinvestment and gender segregation in the sector. Almost half of all childcare workers earn below the real living wage (48%). This is a significantly higher figure than the proportion of all workers who earn below the real living wage (30%).

More worryingly, the median annual gross pay for childcare workers is almost half of that compared to the average of all workers (£11,028 compared to £21,254). This is related to the fact that not only are childcare workers likely to earn significantly less per hour worked than the average employee, but they are also more likely to work on a part-time basis.

The current situation regarding pay and job quality shows that workers are underpaid and undervalued. If childcare is to become an important and valued service, then the workers who provide that service also require to be valued. To bring workers into the childcare sector, to maintain staff morale and reduce turnover, there needs to be significant action in properly valuing childcare workers and rewarding skills and experience.

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

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Investing adequately, based on an informed assessment of realistic needs, to deliver a high-quality childcare infrastructure that is affordable for all to access, and providers to deliver.
- * Work extensively with the women's sector and childcare sector in the development of a childcare strategy and childcare provision for Northern Ireland.
- * Fully implementing CEDAW recommendations, noting the particular reference to Northern Ireland, calling on the Government to introduce a costed Childcare Strategy that is underpinned by legislation, meets the needs of children, parents, childcare providers and benefits local economy.
- * Ensuring all parents and childcare providers are accessing the financial help they are entitled to.
- * Address the gender segregation of the childcare sector through the creation of sectoral agreements; providing a mechanism to introduce a skills and wage infrastructure so as to improve job quality.
- * Promoting family friendly policies and practices across all sectors to reduce barriers to women accessing and progressing in the workforce.



Rural Women

Gender inequality is amplified for women in rural areas due to Access Poverty³⁶. The accessibility of education, training, work and childcare provision and the cost and availability of public transport are factors in determining women's participation; particularly in rural areas³⁷. Women in NI remain under-represented in public and political life³⁸ and rural women's participation in public and political life is further hindered by geography and distance from decision making spaces.

Even within the wider women's sector, rural women still need a stronger voice and increased Government funding³⁹. A recent report found that 98.7% of Government funding for service delivery to women's groups went towards urban groups, compared with 1.3% for rural groups. 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 concluded⁴⁰ that rural women needed additional financial support in this Programme:

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

As a result of no Executive in place for 3 years this has never been redressed. It is imperative that women in rural areas have proposed future budgets; Programme for Government and policy recovery planning assessed for rural impacts¹² to ensure the inequity of Government resourcing does not continue.

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

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

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

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

⁴⁰ Ibid.

NI Government funding support for the work of the only dedicated regional service to support rural women in their communities (NIRWN) is now 13% of what it was in 2007.

The COVID-19 crisis is predicted to have far-reaching consequences that will be felt for years to come. The trajectory of rural development has thus changed, and so must we. We must think differently in order to help rural entrepreneurs cope with economic stresses amid the pandemic.

The added difficulty we face in NI is that, as part of the UK, we have now left the EU and will no longer have access to EU Rural Development funding and policy development and we have no indigenous rural development policy of our own.

Development of our own rural policy post Brexit has been halted to prioritise dealing with the pandemic but the timeline for the Protocol⁴¹ implementation remains unchanged. Whilst the rural voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector is adept at balancing social, economic and environmental needs, it has been heavily stretched in the years leading up to the pandemic and now faces even more challenges⁴².



⁴¹ UK Government [Northern Ireland Protocol](#) Oct 2019

⁴² Milbourne, L. and Cushman, M. (2015) '[Complying, Transforming or Resisting in the New Austerity? Realignment](#)

[Social Welfare and Independent Action among English Voluntary Organisations.](#)' Journal of Social Policy, Vol. 44, pp. 463–485

This sector is heavily reliant on older volunteers and female leaders, and with social shielding of older populations, the sector is facing challenges linked to labour availability. 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.

Summary of Recommendations:

Although these issues are primarily the concern of the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, the Executive Office should be made aware of these recommendations as it is essential they are considered in the upcoming drafting of the Programme for Government (2021)

- * 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.
- * NI Executive work quickly on ensuring we have a Rural Development policy that supports vibrant, gender equal, rural communities.
- * Resourcing and support for rural community capacity building to aid Covid-19 recovery and sustainability.
- * Rural business support initiatives are required.



De-commodification of Housing

The right to housing, shelter or appropriate accommodation is covered extensively by many international treaties and human rights bodies. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)⁴³ and Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)⁴⁴ guarantee the right to housing as part of the right to an adequate standard of living. This is expanded upon in the Yogyakarta Principles⁴⁵, which covers the application of human rights law in relation to sexual and gender minorities. The Principles state:

“Everyone has the right to adequate housing, including protection from eviction, without discrimination and that States shall:

- a) take all necessary legislative, administrative and other measures to ensure security of tenure and access to affordable, habitable, accessible, culturally appropriate and safe housing, not including shelters and other emergency accommodation, without discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or material or family status;
- b) take all necessary legislative, administrative and other measures to prohibit the execution of evictions that are not in conformity with their international human rights obligations, and ensure that adequate and effective legal or other appropriate remedies are available.”

⁴³ United Nations (1948) [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR), p 7.

⁴⁴ United Nations (1966) [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR), p 4.

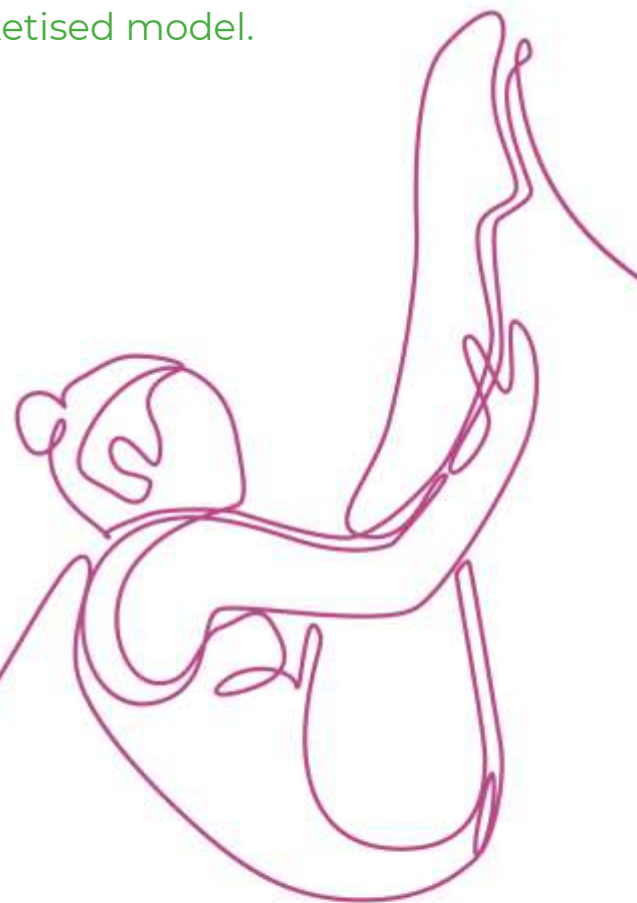
⁴⁵ [Yogyakarta Principles](#) (2017)



Despite this right being comprehensively covered in human rights law, its application and interpretation on the ground has been significantly lacking. Housing is commodified: land to be bought and sold, turned for a profit, or squeezed for as much overhead as possible, rather than being treated as a right. Support from the PSNI in trying to address issues such as homelessness, often attempts to address symptoms of the problem - such as mental illness and substance misuse - rather than addressing its fundamental cause.

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

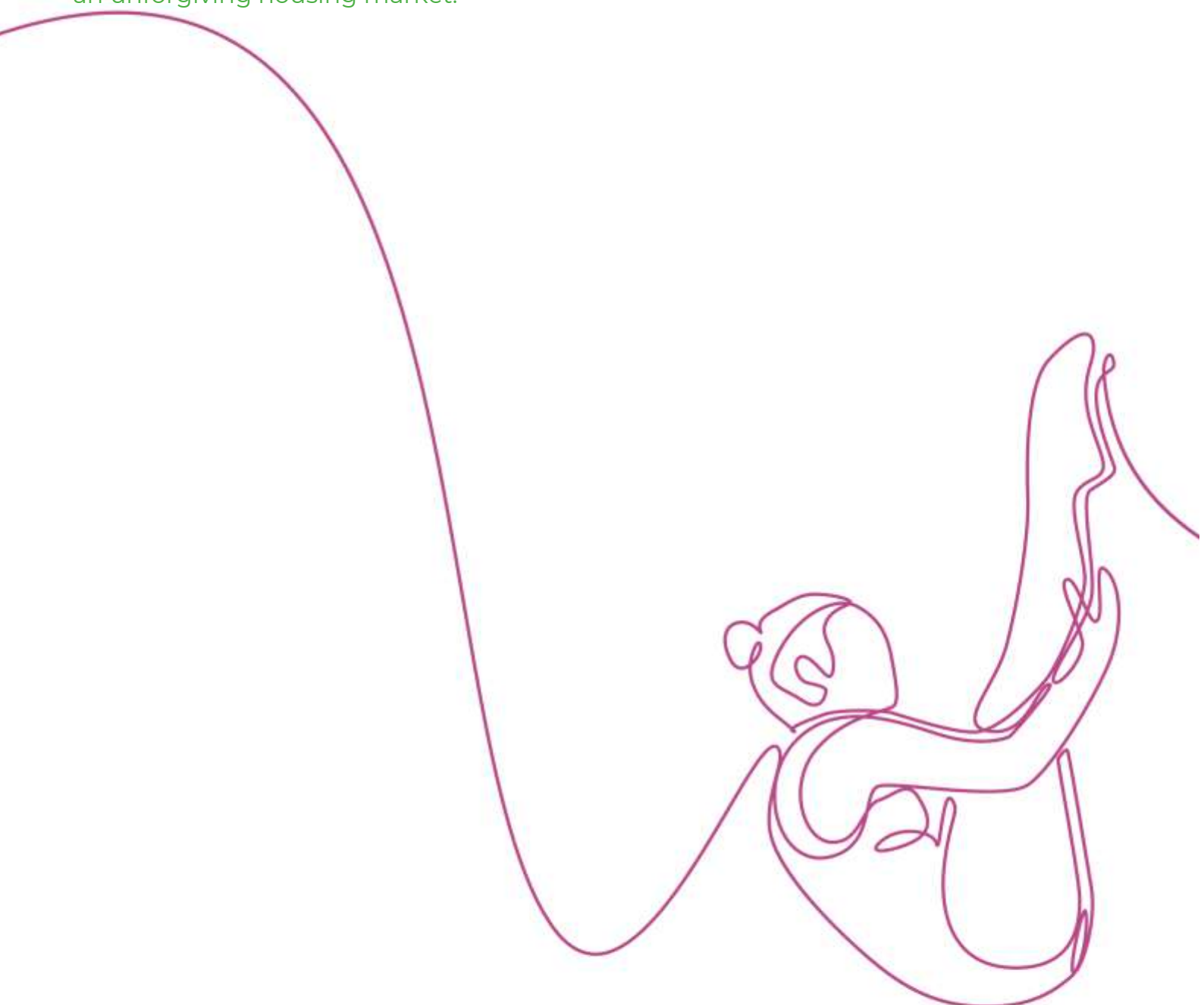
Naturally, this has a specifically negative impact on women, LGBT+ people, BAME people, disabled people, and working-class people generally, often leading to an inability to access housing and engage with this marketised model.



Many of these groups experience homelessness in disproportionate levels, often stemming from experiences of financial or other means of coercive control, domestic or sexual violence, or discrimination from private landlords.

Many individuals are also trapped within coercive and abusive situations, in the knowledge that if they were to attempt to leave, they would be at the mercy of an unforgiving housing market.

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



Summary of Recommendations:

- * In the short term, restrict home ownership to one per individual, and engage in a process of dismantling large housing monopolies and seizing empty/derelict buildings, as well as those where tenants are living in unsustainable conditions
- * In the medium and long term, any new housing developments built should be brought under public ownership and maintained by the state, and individuals with multiple properties who profit from rental income should give up these properties and have the tenancy transferred to the state.
- * De-commodifying the housing system in this way removes the significant rent pressures on the most vulnerable in society.
- * Pay for housing and property upkeep through taxation instead of inflated and unpredictable rent requests, which often line pockets instead of going towards upkeep
- * Grant of Secure tenancies in cases of domestic violence and abuse with recognition of the differing needs of disabled women, traveller women, trans communities, rural women, migrant women etc.

Social Justice Pillar



Racial Justice

The WPG stands in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. We are deeply concerned about how the PSNI treated the Black Lives Matter protesters in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry on Saturday 6th June 2020. We note that it has been confirmed that a last-minute amendment was made to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020⁴⁶ just hours before the anti-racism protests started, which attached enforcement powers to the regulations and enabled the PSNI to fine those in attendance; despite evidence of safety and social distancing being in place. Since the protest, the PSNI's actions have been described as both discriminatory⁴⁷ and unlawful⁴⁸. As noted in the Policing Board Report, which reviewed the PSNI's response to the BLM protest:

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



⁴⁶ Department of Health (2020) 'The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions ([Amendment No. 5](#)) Regulations'

⁴⁷ Young, D. (2020) "[Policing of Black Lives Matter Protests was Discriminatory – Ombudsman](#)" Belfast Telegraph [article]

⁴⁸ Northern Ireland Policing Board (2020) '[Report](#) on the Thematic Review of the Policing Response to COVID-19'

The New Decade New Approach Agreement⁴⁹ made a commitment to create a Racial Equality Strategy as part of the Programme for Government. The development and implementation of this Strategy is more important than ever, with racism being an issue that has become increasingly prevalent in Northern Ireland in recent years.

In 2016-17, statistics show that racially motivated hate crime overtook sectarian hate crimes⁵⁰ for the first time in the history of Northern Ireland.

More recently, the PSNI recorded 936 racist incidents including 626 racist crimes⁵¹ between April 2019 and March 2020. Many people may not have felt able to report to the police and so the real figure is likely much higher. We are calling for the urgent creation and implementation of a Racial Equality Strategy (which was already committed to within the New Decade, New Approach agreement) and for further measures to be taken in the Programme for Government to tackle the systemic racism that exists in NI.

In Northern Ireland, racism is so deeply embedded in our society that it is even in our built environment. In Newry, there is a statue and a street dedicated to John Mitchel, a supporter of the trade in enslaved people who called for the reopening of the African slave trade in 1957 and described Black people as “innately inferior”.

We have a duty to recognise our own privilege and begin to dismantle the pillars that uphold systemic racism; including aspects of our built environment that glorify prominent racists.

⁴⁹ [New Decade New Approach Agreement \(2020\)](#), p. 27.

⁵⁰ PSNI (2018) [“Trends in Hate Motivated Incidents and Crimes Recorded”](#) by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2017/18” p.6

⁵¹ PSNI (2020) [“Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland,”](#) p.4

We also support calls for the closure of the Larne House Immigration Detention Centre in the Larne PSNI Station. This centre houses women and men together. There is no women-only recreation space and so many women are forced to self-confine to their rooms due to safety concerns. The poor conditions and inadequate facilities for traumatised people needlessly

incarcerated here has been highlighted by HM Inspectorate of Prisons multiple times. It is entirely inappropriate to house an immigration detention centre in a PSNI station, as this prevents people with irregular immigration status from coming to the PSNI for help. This is a situation that disproportionately impacts people of colour. In the context of COVID-19, evidence suggests that the pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on ethnic minority communities and health and care staff.

The NHS Confederation BME Leadership Network have outlined the below concerns to ensure senior health leaders and policy makers can make informed decision-making to address this⁵²:

- * Overrepresentation of BME health and care professionals among COVID-19 fatalities.
- * Some BME groups are at higher risk of certain diseases and conditions and a number of BME staff from various socio-economic backgrounds have died from the virus.
- * Better and more transparent collection and reporting of ethnicity data is needed to understand the full impact of COVID-19 on ethnic minority communities.



⁵² NHS Confederation (2020) [BME Leadership Network Member Briefing](#)

Research from the WBG, LSE, Queen Mary University of London and the Fawcett Society has also produced significant evidence on ethnic minority women and the impact of COVID-19⁵³:

- Women of colour are more worried about debt as a result of the pandemic - 49.9% compared to 37.1% of white women and 34.2% of white men.
- Work-related anxiety for those working outside the home was highest among people of colour, with 65.1% of women and 73.8% of men reporting anxiety.
- Of those working from home, a higher proportion of people of colour (41.0% of women and 39.8% of men) reported working more than they did before the pandemic compared to white people (29.2% of women and 28.5% of men).
- Nearly half of women of colour (45.4%) said they were struggling to cope with all the different demands on their time at the moment (work, home schooling, unpaid care, domestic labour) compared to 34.6% of white women and 29.6% of white men.
- For all questions regarding struggling to balance paid work and unpaid care, women of colour were the most likely to report struggling and white men were the least likely.
- Twice as many women and men of colour reported that they had recently lost support from the government (42.5% and 48.3%) than white women and men (12.7% and 20.6%).
- Only 47.4% of people of colour said there were people outside of their household who they could rely on for help, compared with 57.2% of white people.

⁵³ WBG et. al. (2020), '[BAME women and COVID-19 - Research Evidence](#)'

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Incorporate accountability mechanisms into the Programme for Government to address systemic racism.
- * We call on all parties to support the urgent cancellation of all fines issued to protesters; particularly as there have been several allegations of black protesters being specifically targeted and fined.
- * Immediately close the Larne Detention Centre.
- * Implement the Racial Equality Strategy in full
- * Better and more transparent collection and reporting of ethnicity data is needed to understand the full impact of COVID-19; including reports from employers of redundancies with breakdowns of protected characteristics.
- * Support the scrapping of 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (UK Immigration Act, 1971).
- * Introduce quotas and shortlists to increase the levels of representation of people of colour, especially women, in public life in Northern Ireland given the non-existent representation at present.
- * Complete and publish meaningful and comprehensive equality impact assessments of all COVID-19 policy decisions informed by intersectional data.
- * Ban exploitative zero-hour contracts and increase the real living wage to improve the working conditions of people of colour, particularly women, who are over-represented in low-paid precarious work.
- * Support families' access to educational resources and equipment at home to minimise the increased racial attainment gaps - including the provision of IT equipment and additional support for parents.

Politics, Public Life, Peacebuilding & Decision Making

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

In 2008, 2013 and 2019 the CEDAW Committee called for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in Northern Ireland⁵⁴. 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 peacebuilding in Northern Ireland is a serious matter to be addressed as a matter of urgency.**

Despite this, there has been little progress on increasing women's participation in securing peace or in post-conflict reconstruction in Northern Ireland.

⁵⁴ United Nations (1979) [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW), Articles 1

and 2. The UK signed the Convention in 1981 and ratified in 1986.

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 2014 Stormont House Agreement outlined structures to deal with the past in Northern Ireland, but contained no specific mechanisms for increasing the involvement of women. Extensive consultation with women⁵⁵ found that many feel disempowered, have difficulty circumnavigating community gatekeepers (including paramilitary groups) and fear harm if they were to speak out. The three-year collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive will likely impact the 2021 target date for reaching gender equality in public appointments.

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.

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.

To date, recovery planning has taken place with little to no consultation with the women's sector, who have been consistently producing evidence of the disproportionate impact COVID-19 is having on women. Voluntary and community sector groups have been set up without women's organisations being initially invited. Additionally, the Department for Economy's Economic Advisory Group was established without the inclusion of any civil society organisations, trade unions, or the women's sector.

⁵⁵ [Council of Europe Convention](#) on the prevention and combating violence against women and girls (Istanbul Convention, 2011)



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.

In this response, it is imperative that women are included in decision making across all departments in Northern Ireland. 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.

In addition to addressing women's lack of participation in COVID-19 response planning, 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'⁵⁶, which were developed in 2015 by a multi-disciplinary group of human rights experts and academics, could assist in achieving this.

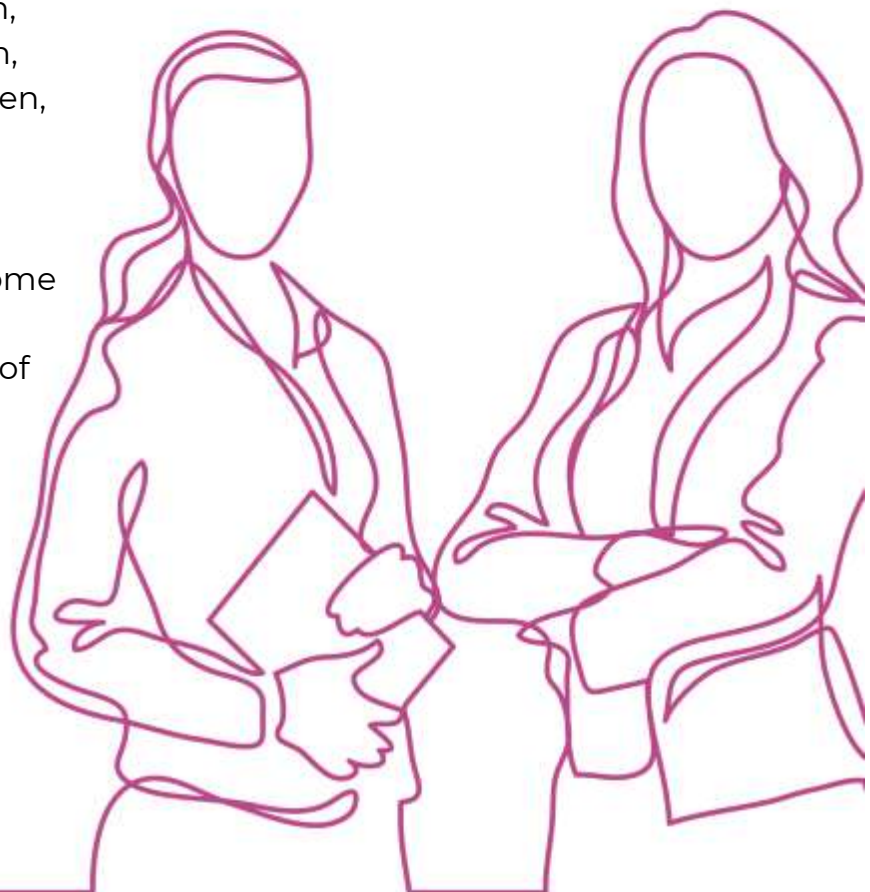
The 2014 Stormont House Agreement (SHA), the latest agreement outlining structures to deal with the past in Northern Ireland, contained no specific mechanisms for increasing the involvement of women. Extensive consultation with women⁵⁷ found that many feel disempowered, have difficulty circumnavigating community gate-keepers (including paramilitary groups) and fear harm if they were to speak out.

⁵⁶ O'Rourke, C. (2015) '[Gender Principles for Dealing with the Legacy of the Past](#)', Transitional Justice Institute.

⁵⁷ [Council of Europe Convention](#) on the prevention and combating violence against women and girls (Istanbul Convention, 2011)

Summary of Recommendations:

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



Digital Divide and Access Poverty

Access to digital technologies is still limited in Northern Ireland, primarily due to uneven broadband access and coverage, especially in rural areas. Many women, in particular older women, also report lack of skills and confidence in using technology. Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP) hosted a conference on CEDAW in January 2020, featuring CEDAW Committee vice chair Nicole Ameline as keynote speaker. In her keynote, Mme Ameline highlighted the gender aspects of the digital divide and emphasised that **women and girls need to be fully engaged in the development of technology, including artificial intelligence..**

Mme Ameline emphasised the risks of artificial intelligence, as current evidence indicates algorithms are male oriented and often produce discriminatory results for women in all spheres of life, from assessing eligibility for loans or credit cards to accessing social protection. This is also true when it comes to the use of facial recognition technologies (where it is allowed) as women are more likely to be misidentified.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the gender aspects of the digital divide, with reports of mothers struggling to support their children's education on mobile phones, and teenagers scrambling to complete schoolwork on mobiles or a single family laptop.



Older women are among the groups least likely to be digitally connected and computer literate, although efforts were made to address this particularly during the pandemic. Newcomer, asylum seeking and refugee families also face challenges in accessing affordable internet services, which are critical for them to maintain contact with their extended families and through this, support their health and wellbeing⁵⁸.

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.



⁵⁸ See the [Participation and Practice of Rights \(PPR\) campaign](#) 'Internet Access for All' with 670 signatures [as of 07.01.21]

No Recourse to Public Funds/ Immigration

The barriers in accessing social security for the migrant community have been painfully highlighted during the economic uncertainty of the coronavirus crisis. Section 3(1)(c)(ii) of the Immigration Act 1971⁵⁹ provides that limited leave to enter or remain in the United Kingdom may be subject to a condition requiring that person maintain themselves, and any dependents, without recourse to public funds⁶⁰. This is known as 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF). Since 2012, a 'NRPF condition' has been imposed on nearly all migrants granted the right to live or work in the UK. This means the person holding leave is permitted to work in the UK and pays taxes, but is prohibited from accessing the public funds paid for by those very taxes. Breaching a NRPF condition can result in a criminal conviction, can negatively impact future immigration status; and applying to have NRPF lifted can result in a visa renewal period being changed to a ten-year route.

Local authority and social services departments have some limited statutory duties to provide support to people who are subject to NRPF. For example, in Northern Ireland, social services commonly are required to step in and protect the welfare of children who have become destitute due to NRPF. However, some NRPF groups are excluded from local authority support, unless it is necessary to prevent a breach of their human rights. In practice, it can be very difficult to obtain support from social services. A report by the Migration Observatory found that around 1.376 million people hold valid UK visas that would usually be subject to the NRPF condition.

⁵⁹ UK Government (1971) [Immigration Act](#) [legislation]

⁶⁰ Ibid. The definition of 'public funds' in Paragraph 6 of the Immigration Rules covers most benefits which are paid for by the state such as child benefit, housing benefit or

universal credit. It does not include benefits that are based on National Insurance contributions, such as statutory sick pay or statutory maternity pay.

The NRPF policy disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups such as single parent households, pregnant women and victims of domestic violence (predominantly women). The impact of this policy was exacerbated during the coronavirus crisis, as job losses and economic uncertainty left people subject to NRPF unable to access support. In Northern Ireland, the Covid-19 Discretionary Support (Amendment) Regulations created a Discretionary Support Grant to urgently support those affected by the Coronavirus crisis. However, persons subject to NRPF cannot access these.

Summary of Recommendations:

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

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.⁶¹

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 Protocol⁶². It has also committed to keeping pace with any EU changes to certain equality laws including particular gender equality laws.⁶³ However, there are a number of issues regarding women's rights in the context of Brexit which have yet to be addressed.

⁶¹ Human Rights Consortium (2018), '[Brexit and Northern Ireland: Rights at Risk Report](#)'

⁶² UK Government (2020) "[UK Government commitment to 'no diminution of rights' in Northern Ireland](#)" [Explainer document]

⁶³ 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:⁶⁴ equality between men and women,⁶⁵ the right to equal pay for equal work,⁶⁶ protection against discrimination on the ground of pregnancy and maternity,⁶⁷ introducing measures to provide specific advantages to the underrepresented gender,⁶⁸ prohibition of discriminations

on the grounds of sex,⁶⁹ and introduction of paid holidays.⁷⁰ 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;⁷¹ 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.⁷²

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

One of the most concerning decisions by the UK government has been to remove the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights from all applications in UK law and judiciary systems. Whilst the UK government would still be required to abide by the European Convention of Human Rights, the removal of the EU Charter is deeply worrying as it has a much broader level of protection for

human rights⁷³. Articles relevant to women in Northern Ireland include, but are not limited to, **Article 20** on the right to equality before law; **Article 21** which prohibits discrimination; **Article 23** on the right to equality between men and women; **Article 34** on the right to social security (which is significant in cases of maternity pay); and **Article 35** on the right to healthcare.

⁶⁴ 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.

⁶⁵ The [EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#) (2012)

⁶⁶ [Article 119](#) Treaty (2016) establishing the European Economic Community.

⁶⁷ 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."](#)

⁶⁸ Ibid. 21

⁶⁹ Sex and other grounds for discrimination are covered in Article 21, EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (Ibid. 21).

⁷⁰ 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.

⁷¹ Ibid. 26. (NIRWN 'Rural Voices' Report, 2018)

⁷² Alongside various EU funding streams that support the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland.

⁷³ A comparison of the breadth of the EU Charter and the ECHR can be found in the Human Rights Consortium Rights at Risk Report, p.26-27 (Ibid. 26).

Existing EU Law – Court of Justice of the European Union

Future case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) will no longer be binding in UK courts post-Brexit. **Any existing CJEU laws from before Brexit will still be binding, however, these can now be overturned** in future cases in UK courts and a departure from current jurisprudence

may lead to a divergence on human rights standards on either side of the border in Northern Ireland. As EU human rights instruments will be seen as invalid post-Brexit, it will be difficult to enforce human rights through the courts or hold the UK government accountable in courts outside the UK.

Human Rights Act 1998

In the lead up to the Brexit referendum, many calls were made to repeal or replace the UK Human Rights Act post-Brexit. Since the 2016 referendum, the UK Government has failed to provide commitments that it will not repeal or replace the Human Rights Act. Many are deeply concerned about the impact

this, and the removal of the EU Charter, will have on human rights. **The EU human rights framework is much more robust than the UK Human Rights Act.** The removal of both the Human Rights Act and the EU Charter will make it much more difficult for people to access their rights through the courts.

Good Friday Agreement

There have been worrying reinterpretations of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement by the former Prime Minister Theresa May and current Prime Minister Boris Johnson, in a vastly different approach to previous UK Governments, with EU officials accusing Prime Minister Johnson of reneging on pledges to uphold the agreement⁷⁴. In this context, it is essential to point out **the importance of avoiding a divergence of rights on either side of the border.**

[Slip Through The Cracks in US Trade Deal Talks](#), Irish News [article]

⁷⁴ Rankin, J., (2019) [‘Johnson has reneged on Good Friday Agreement Vows Says EU’](#), The Guardian [article] see also: Hughes, B. (2020) [‘Brexit: Good Friday Agreement Cannot](#)

For example, areas of protections such as violence against women, or child maintenance payments, rely on EU wide measures to ensure the legal systems on the island of Ireland are co-ordinated to protect vulnerable people through the criminal justice and family law systems⁷⁵. This is essential to ensure that

people cannot avoid the repercussions of violence against women, or refusing to pay child maintenance, by simply crossing the border. *All aspects of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement need to be protected and implemented;* including a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland where specific focus can be given to the rights of women.

Missed Opportunities: Current EU Work on Rights

There are many missed future opportunities for the enhancement of rights that would benefit the lives of women in Northern Ireland. For example, as highlighted by the Human Rights Consortium, the EU has also sought to extend parental rights to leave⁷⁶ and encourage better childcare support for families⁷⁷ with the strategic aim of reducing the gender pay gap and advancing women's rights more generally. Furthermore, 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 mothers⁷⁸. It is worth nothing 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.

⁷⁵ EU Council (2003) "[Directive 2003/8/EC: Legal aid in civil and commercial matters](#)" [EU Legislation]

⁷⁶ EU Council (2010) [Directive 2010/18/EU](#) implementing the revised Framework Agreement on parental leave (8th March 2010)

⁷⁷ European Commission (2013) "[Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage](#)" Recommendations.

⁷⁸ Trades Union Congress (TUC) (2016) '[Women Workers' Rights and the Risks of Brexit](#)'

It is evident that women in Northern Ireland are in line to face the brunt of the impact of Brexit. The UK Women's Budget Group maintains that women will be adversely impacted by the economic impacts of Brexit⁷⁹. 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 reform⁸⁰ and future austerity on gender equality⁸¹. 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 the implications that have arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the rights at risk highlighted above are due to worsen as pre-existing inequalities are exacerbated. With all the hard-fought women's rights protections won at an EU level now at risk, and many human rights still failing to have been implemented at all, there are many reasons to be deeply concerned about the impact of Brexit on the women in Northern Ireland.

⁷⁹ UK Women's Budget Group (2017) '[Economic Impact of Brexit on Women](#)'

⁸⁰ Harding, S. (2019) '[Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives](#)', Women's Regional Consortium

⁸¹ NIWEP (2018) 'Women and Gender Equality in a Changing Europe: A roundtable to explore women's priorities in Brexit' [Unpublished]

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,



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

A series of agreements in Northern Ireland in recent years have made mention of the Bill of Rights without making any actual progress towards delivering a meaningful set of rights. Indeed, in the New Decade New Approach document, beyond provision for new languages legislation, there is little evidence of positive progress in advancing the legal protection of rights formally. The New Decade New Approach document strays from previous agreements in recent years in that it provides for the (now functioning) Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights. However, with no agreed process for delivery of a meaningful set of rights outcomes when the Committee concludes its work, there is concern that the Committee could simply become the latest delaying tactic in this long running process.

This commitment to establishing a framework of human rights that was to run throughout the Agreement and the government institutions it established was to be an important confidence building measure in a society that had just experienced decades of conflict.

Provision for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, which was to build upon the rights contained within the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) by including supplementary rights influenced by International Standards and our local circumstances, was provided for in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and voted for by an overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland through referendum.



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

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

In December 2009, the UK government produced a consultation document, which rejected the majority of the advice provided by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. In their reasoning for failing to include the extensive advice of the NIHRC, the government stated that they did not see these additional rights as falling within the test of being particular to Northern Ireland or of not being the most appropriate method to realise the particular rights.

Since the 1998 peace agreement there has been a consistent need for a Bill of Rights for NI, given its potential to build confidence within communities that abuses of the past will not be repeated, and that those abuses which did occur will be rectified.

However, given the current time of uncertainty created by the UK exit from the EU, the potential repeal of the Human Rights Act, the impact of years of austerity and those of coronavirus, (each of which impact differently on women than on the rest of society, as already explored in this paper), a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland is even more valuable as it could provide assurance and stability that whatever the future of Northern Ireland, the rights of all will be protected, respected and fulfilled.

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

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

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

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



The two other devolved nations of the United Kingdom, Scotland and Wales, have both made strides to incorporate international standards into domestic decision making. The United Kingdom is a signatory to seven of the nine UN Human Rights Treaties, meaning it has agreed to be bound by them. However, because of the dualist system of the UK, these rights are not automatically enforceable once the UK becomes a signatory. Scotland and Wales, therefore, have used powers within their own devolved competencies in order to give further effect to the rights in these treaties which represent international obligations to which the UK has agreed to be bound.

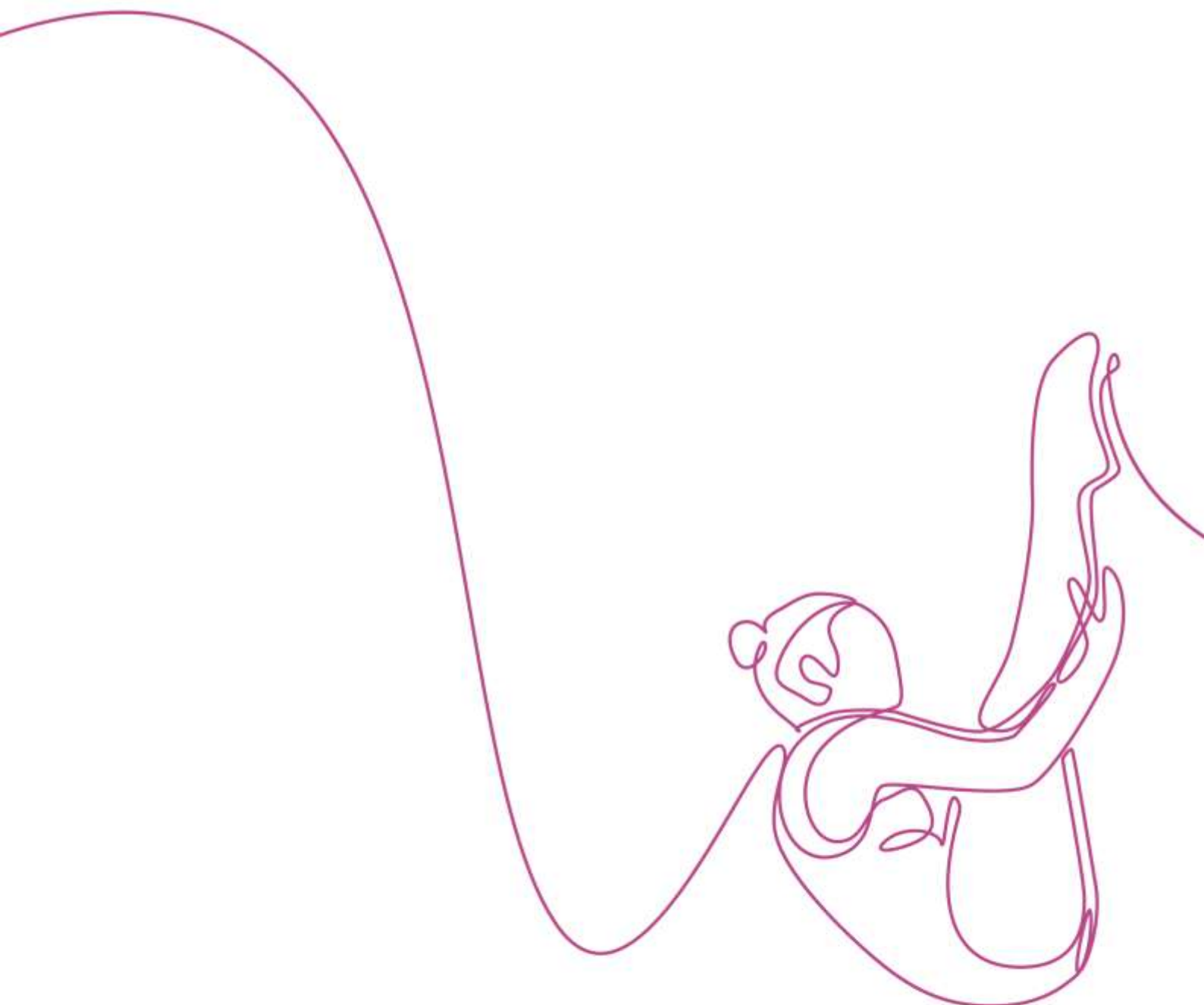
The Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 requires that Welsh Ministers, in exercising any of their functions, have due regard to Part 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and also select articles from the first and second optional protocols. Similarly, Part 1 of the Children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

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



Summary of Recommendations:

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



International Best Practice

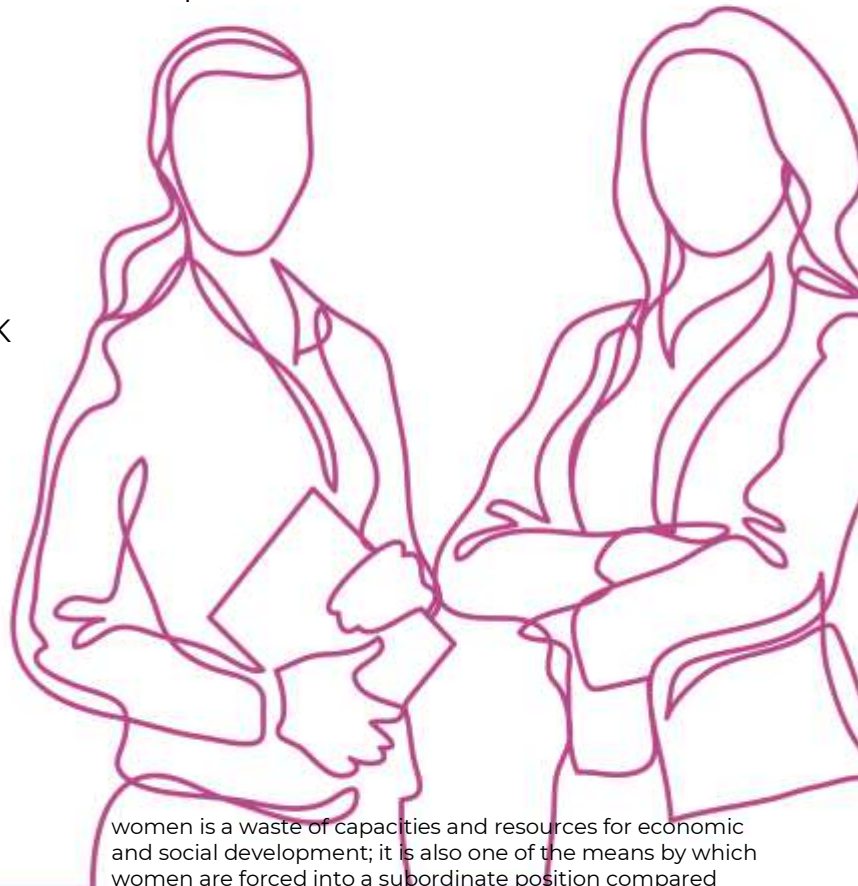


International Best Practice: Introduction

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

The most recent Concluding Observations (2019) emphasise putting protections for women in Northern Ireland on an equal footing with protections elsewhere in the UK. The UK is also a member of the Council of Europe, which established the integration of gender equality as one of its policy goals.

The Council has adopted Standards for Gender Equality, which set out a list of measures to be taken across policy areas, including violence against women⁸². In 2011, the Council adopted the Istanbul Convention on preventing violence against women and combating domestic violence, which sets out clear standards for states to implement. Compliance with requirements is essential to enable states to ratify the Convention; the UK is yet to ratify. It is vital that concerned action across the UK is taken to ensure the UK is compliant with the Convention and can complete ratification.



⁸² Council of Europe [Gender Equality Key Standards](#). The Standards state that 'Violence against women is one of the most serious violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and an obstacle to the enjoyment of those rights and freedoms. Furthermore, violence against

women is a waste of capacities and resources for economic and social development; it is also one of the means by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men and is, therefore, a decisive impediment to the achievement of gender equality'.

Case Study: Amnesty International UK – International Outlook

In May 2020, Amnesty International, Women’s Link Worldwide and International Planned Parenthood Federation published ‘A Guide for Europe: Protecting the Rights of Women and Girls in times of Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath’. The guide highlighted that **the COVID-19 pandemic —like all crises—has a distinct impact on women and girls** that is both immediate and that poses the risk of exacerbating pre-existing gender-based and other intersecting inequalities. This crisis has exposed the structural and systemic discrimination that women and girls have long faced. **The women and girls who already experience marginalisation are being differentially and disproportionately affected by the pandemic.** Unless their rights are protected, their voices are heard and their needs are met, they will be further deprived of justice.⁸³

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

“the most widespread human rights violation in the world.”⁸⁴

⁸³ Amnesty International (2020) Women’s Link Worldwide and International Planned Parenthood Federation “[A Guide](#)

[for Europe: Protecting the rights of women and girls in times of Covid19 pandemic and its aftermath](#)”

⁸⁴ Ibid.



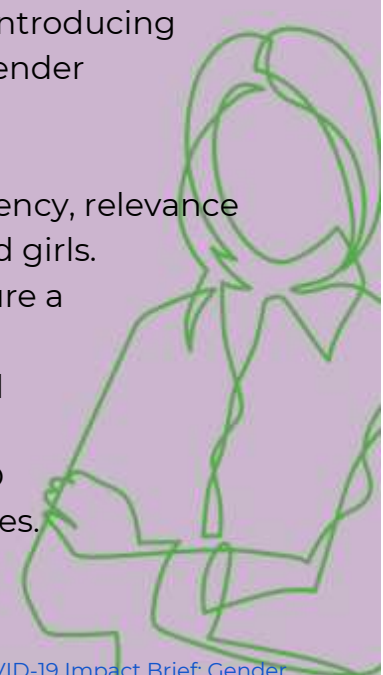
Initiatives at UN Level

The UN Global Compact⁸⁵ 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 better⁸⁶. These include a brief on gender equality⁸⁷, 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. 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.
- * 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.



⁸⁵ [UN Global Impact Support for Businesses Resource \[Website\]](#)

⁸⁶ UN Global Impact (2020) [20th Anniversary Campaign \[Website\]](#)

⁸⁷ UN Global Compact (2020) [“COVID-19 Impact Brief: Gender Equality” \[Website\]](#)

Health Pillar



Mental Health Concerns due to Covid-19

Along with the vital physical health considerations, one of the most concerning health implications from the COVID-19 lockdown is the impact on women's mental health. The WPG is deeply concerned that out of a total £90 million health allocation, just £1.5 million was requested for the Mental Health Action Plan by Health Minister Robin Swann. The health foundation states that 'good mental health is an asset and is also linked to good physical health - both of which support positive social and economic outcomes for individuals and society⁸⁸'.

Northern Ireland has faced a mental health crisis for several years, and this is likely to have worsened due to the lockdown. Urgent measures need to be taken to address this crisis and support the women impacted by poor mental health in Northern Ireland. In doing this, it is essential to recognise that poor mental health is strongly associated with social and economic circumstances. For example, studies from past viral outbreaks show well-documented increases in mental health disorders as a result of social isolation, job and financial losses, housing insecurity and quality, working in a front-line service, loss of coping mechanisms and reduced access to mental health services⁸⁹. Women are disproportionately represented in poverty, social housing, and employment related to frontline services and care-giving.



⁸⁸ Marshall, L. et. al. (2020), '[Emerging evidence on COVID-19's impact on mental health and health inequalities](#)', The Health Foundation

⁸⁹ Chakraborty, N. (2020), '[The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on mental health](#)', Progress in Neurology and Psychiatry, Vol. 24 (2).

Medical professionals have warned that existing health inequalities are likely to widen without urgent action to support the most vulnerable to the economic and other effects of social distancing measures⁹⁰.

Mental health care cannot ignore race, gender, sexuality, or disability, and mental health professionals must be culturally competent in the language and experiences of women in these communities in order to properly care for them.

Some of the marginalised groups we would recommend urgent mental health support, through increased access to mental health services; specialised medical interventions and higher levels of specialised support include victims of domestic and sexual violence and LGBT+ people.

The lockdown has exacerbated domestic violence (“DV”) against women. **Between July 2018 and June 2019, there were 16, 575 domestic abuse crimes⁹¹ recorded in Northern Ireland - the highest since records began in 2004/05.** Since then, lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated domestic violence (“DV”) against women, with three deaths in Northern Ireland attributed to DV during the initial months of lockdown (March to May 2020).⁹² During the first three weeks of April 2020, 2000 domestic abuse calls were made to the PSNI.⁹³

Domestic violence often involves a pattern of coercive control and manipulation that can lead to extensive mental health trauma including a loss of self-esteem, depression and isolation. Victims of domestic violence require specific and appropriate mental health services, including safety planning, therapy, and/or counselling. Victims of sexual violence also require appropriate therapy and counselling services.

⁹⁰ Douglas, M. et. al. (2020), ‘[Mitigating the wider health effects of covid-19 pandemic response](#)’, The British Medical Journal

⁹¹ McCracken, N. (2019) “[Domestic Violence: NI crime rates highest on record](#),” BBC News.

⁹² McCormack, J. (April 2020) “[Coronavirus: Three domestic killings since lockdown began](#),” BBC News.

⁹³ Ibid.

LGBT+ communities in Northern Ireland experience mental health issues at disproportionately high levels due to widespread social stigma, abuse, and institutionalised homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. **Mental health issues within the community are exacerbated by statutory services which fail to meet their needs** including: failure to adequately fund and competently advertise sexual & reproductive health services; failure to provide transition-related-care for trans individuals; and failure to fund access to IVF for lesbian and bisexual couples.

These issues, compounded with the chronic underfunding of mental health services and lack of cultural competency within such, has led to a mental health crisis within LGBT+ communities. This manifests itself in a variety of different ways; such as depression, suicide, substance abuse, self-harm, unemployment and homelessness. Disproportionate mental health issues within LGBT+ communities are not inevitable, and are contributed to significantly by the institutionalised issues explained above.

LGBT+ support service providers need to be specifically trained on supporting LGBT people, with this training delivered by/developed with LGBT community orgs. For trans people, mental health support, community support, and access to gender affirming care should have clear and defined pathways between them and be integrated in such a way that improves access to all while not requiring access to mental health care as a prerequisite to other care.

Summary of Recommendations

- * We recommend that specific funding is allocated for appropriate, safe and rapid therapeutic services to victims of domestic violence (DV) and sexual violence (SV).
- * Victims of domestic violence require specific and appropriate mental health services, including safety planning, therapy, and/or counseling. These services should be available to the victim regardless of whether or not she is currently in a relationship with the abuser.
- * Any person who self-identifies as a victim of sexual violence should be able to access services from therapists trained in trauma informed care and victim responses to sexual violence. These services should be provided within a timely manner and prioritised as a matter of urgency.
- * Support services for victims of DV/ SV should be provided by people trained in the dynamics of domestic violence. Some of these services are currently being provided (for example through organisations such as Women's Aid), but should be expanded and funded as a matter of urgency due to the increased risk of DV as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- * Improving access to culturally competent sexual health services (reducing STI/HIV anxiety),
- * Improving cultural competency within drug cessation services, safe injection rooms, etc,
- * Removing crisis/mental health response from PSNI duties, developing emergency community healthcare support for mental health crisis situations,
- * Specifically ring-fence funding for the development of cultural competency within mental health services in direct collaboration with community organisations that represent marginalised women.
- * LGBT+ counselling and mental health services should be funded and delivered in collaboration with community organisations (including those already doing this work, i.e. Rainbow).

Women with Caring Responsibilities & Dependents

With the rapid increase in the numbers of women with caring responsibilities across the UK due to COVID-19, urgent action is needed to address the mental health concerns of carers.

As the majority of carers are also in paid employment, if action is not taken to support this group, it is likely to have long-term detrimental impacts on workforces.

Some statistics on impact of increased caring responsibilities during COVID-19 from the Carers Week report includes⁹⁴:

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

- managing the stress and responsibility (71%)
- the negative impacts on their physical and mental health (70%)
- not being able to take time away from caring (66%).

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

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

⁹⁴ Carers Week (2020), '[Carers Week 2020 Research Report](#): The rise in the number of unpaid carers during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak', Making Caring Visible, p.7.

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

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

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

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

For too long, women and unpaid carers have provided social support that upholds the health and wellbeing of society whilst propping up the NI economy to the value of £4.6 billion per year.⁹⁵ The needs of carers' health should be a priority in any recovery planning in Northern Ireland.



⁹⁵ Carers NI (2015), '[NI Carers save government £4.6 billion a year](#)'; see also: Carers NI (2017) '[State of Caring 2017](#)'

Summary of Recommendations:

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

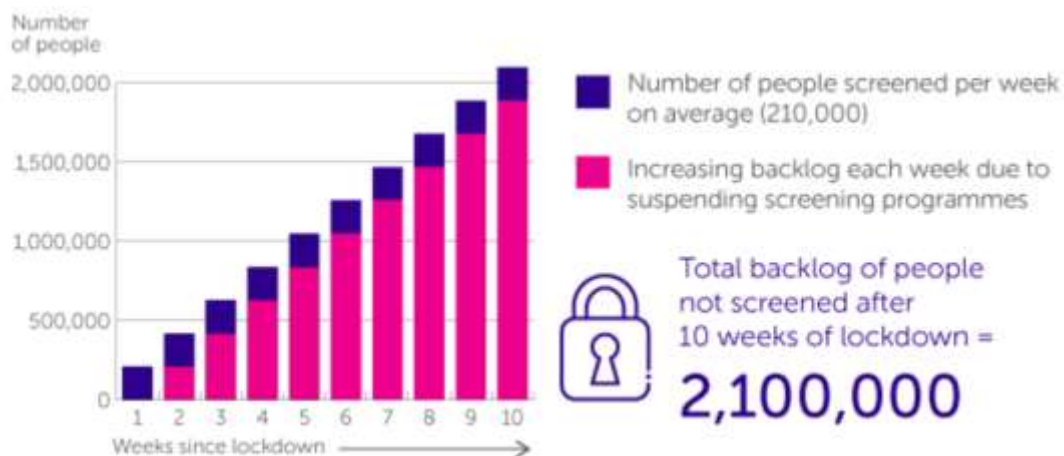
- * Analyse the economic value of putting money into caring, which will help carers get back into paid employment and thus improve their health and financial wellbeing and consequently reduce pressure on the health and benefits systems in the long-run.
- * For a better, more resilient economy, care work must be recognised as a valued job. This means making sure it pays well, attracts investment in education and training, and provides opportunities for promotion.
- * Design a sustainable and stable social care system which is free to the point of use for all citizens, with well paid, well trained permanent staff and funded via general taxation.
- * Introduce policies to encourage sharing of care and unpaid work between women and men.
- * Provide better information and advice for carers, forward planning, and support so that there is a reliable and sustainable care economy which is fit for purpose.
- * NI Assembly should promote awareness of the important role of unpaid carers and caring, and introduce more concrete support so that value is recognised practically.
- * Significant increase in funding for the health and social care system to allow services to rebuild after the crisis, alongside bringing forward plans for long-term reform of social care.
- * The UK Government and NI Assembly should immediately increase the basic level of Carer's Allowance, and a one-off coronavirus Supplement to those entitled to Carer's Allowance of £20 a week to match the rise in Universal Credit.
- * Greater consistency is needed in connecting carers to support available to look after their own mental and physical health and wellbeing.
- * Employers, and the NI Assembly, should ensure that there are carer-friendly policies in place that enable working carers to balance their caring responsibilities with work.
- * Schools, colleges and universities should be encouraged to introduce policies and programmes that support carers and improve their experience of education.

Additional Health Concerns

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

Cancer Research UK have highlighted their concerns over the suspension of cancer screenings and the long-term impact on cancer services and individual health.⁹⁶ As of the beginning of June, more than 2 million people across the UK were waiting for screening, tests and treatments since lockdown began. Figure 17 from Cancer Research UK highlighted the backlog created by suspended cancer screenings:

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



Source: Cancer Research UK

According to Cancer Research UK, for every week that screenings are paused, 7000 people aren't being referred for further tests and 380 cancers aren't being diagnosed. While screenings have been suspended, individuals with symptoms have been less likely to go to their GP and some GPs have been reluctant to risk sending their patients to hospitals for further tests due to the risk of COVID-19.

⁹⁶ Roberts, K., (2020), '[Over 2 million people waiting for cancer screening, tests and treatments](#)', Cancer Research UK

For those needing treatments across the UK (around 12,750 waiting for cancer surgery), operations have fallen to 60% of expected levels, which will also have a long-term impact. Organisations such as the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) travel across Northern Ireland to deliver sessions to increase awareness of the need for people to assess themselves and attend Breast, Cervical and Bowel cancer screenings; and these services must be prioritised as we move out of the lockdown.

Increased Waiting Lists

The issues of backlogs extends beyond cancer screenings, as the NHS Confederation has estimated that NHS waiting lists 'could hit 10 million this year'⁹⁷. As a result, the NHS Confederation has made calls for urgent emergency funding and long-term spending by the UK Government. In particular, medical professionals are concerned about the uphill battle they face in restarting cancer, stroke and heart care services, while continuing to manage thousands of sick and recovering COVID-19 patients while implementing social distancing measures in health settings.

Health waiting lists pre-COVID in Northern Ireland were already at crisis levels, as before the lockdown, around 130,000 people were waiting more than a year for treatment, which creates real risks to patients' quality of life and increases disease and preventable death.

When compared to England and Scotland where approximately 1 in 12 people were on elective waiting lists, 1 in 5 people in Northern Ireland were on waiting lists in 2019. A potential solution for this is to create elective care centres, which may be politically and financially easier than closing sites to centralise care; given huge problems with access poverty and public transport in Northern Ireland.



⁹⁷ BBC News (2020) '[Coronavirus: NHS waiting lists 'could hit 10 million this year'](#)', BBC News 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 as the Department of Health has claimed that any commissioning of services requires approval from the NI Executive Office.

We acknowledge that the issues and recommendations contained in this section are primarily the responsibility of the Department of Health and The Executive Office. However, it is crucial that the Department for Communities supports the implementation of these recommendations and recognises abortion and maternal health as a gender equality issue. The availability and access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services are crucial to women's health and well-being. We believe that free, non-directive sexual and reproductive healthcare should be

made available to all women who wish to avail of it. Women must also be able to access sexual and reproductive health services, including contraception, emergency contraception and the means to access safe abortion care. International human rights law explicitly recognises the rights to sexual and reproductive health and bodily autonomy. These rights give rise to positive state obligations to ensure abortion-related information and services and to remove medically unnecessary barriers that deny access.⁹⁸

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.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Centre for Reproductive Rights (2020) '[Breaking Ground: Treaty Monitoring Bodies on Reproductive Rights](#)' pp 12-14.

⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰

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,¹⁰¹ therefore they should be able to fully access healthcare at home during this global pandemic.¹⁰²

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.**

¹⁰⁰ For details on the best provision for NI, see the [WPG response to the NIO Abortion Framework Consultation](#).

¹⁰¹ For more information on the heavy financial, emotional and logistical burden of travelling to GB on women, see [CEDAW Committee comments](#) (2018)

¹⁰² 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.

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.”¹⁰³

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.



¹⁰³ Girlguiding UK (2019), [‘Girls’ attitudes survey’](#)

The same research from Girlguiding UK reports that young women are negatively influenced by advertising, in both traditional media and social media, that promotes certain beauty standards and encourages the use of cosmetic surgery, extremely restrictive dieting and similar methods including medically unsafe detox and diet products. With eating disorders on the rise¹⁰⁴ and the damage that they can do known to medical professionals, this is something that needs to be strictly regulated for a number of different reasons.

Further, media can be especially critical when considering the intersectional identities that people have, with trans women and women of colour particularly impacted by intense media scrutiny. In addition to this, *there are serious issues with the way the media report on sexual offences and on domestic abuse, violence and homicide.*

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 violence¹⁰⁵. 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,¹⁰⁶ this will not be carried out until 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Marsh, S. (2019) "[Hospital admissions for eating disorders surge to highest in eight years](#)" The Guardian [article]

¹⁰⁵ Petter, O. (2019) "[Feminist Group Wins Campaign to Change how Media Reports Domestic Abuse](#)" The Independent [article]

¹⁰⁶ Northern Ireland Department of Justice (2020) Gillen Review: [Implementation Plan](#).

Before then, a public awareness campaign should begin in formal educational institutions, specifically schools and third level organisations, and such a programme must deal with issues around consent and boundaries, in an age-appropriate manner. Sex and relationships education is currently dependent on individual schools who can choose who to invite to cover the topic and can do so in a way that does not effectively deal with these issues. In addition, they are sometimes entirely heteronormative, not covering LGBTQ+ relationships at all, and therefore not providing the necessary skills to an especially vulnerable demographic.

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

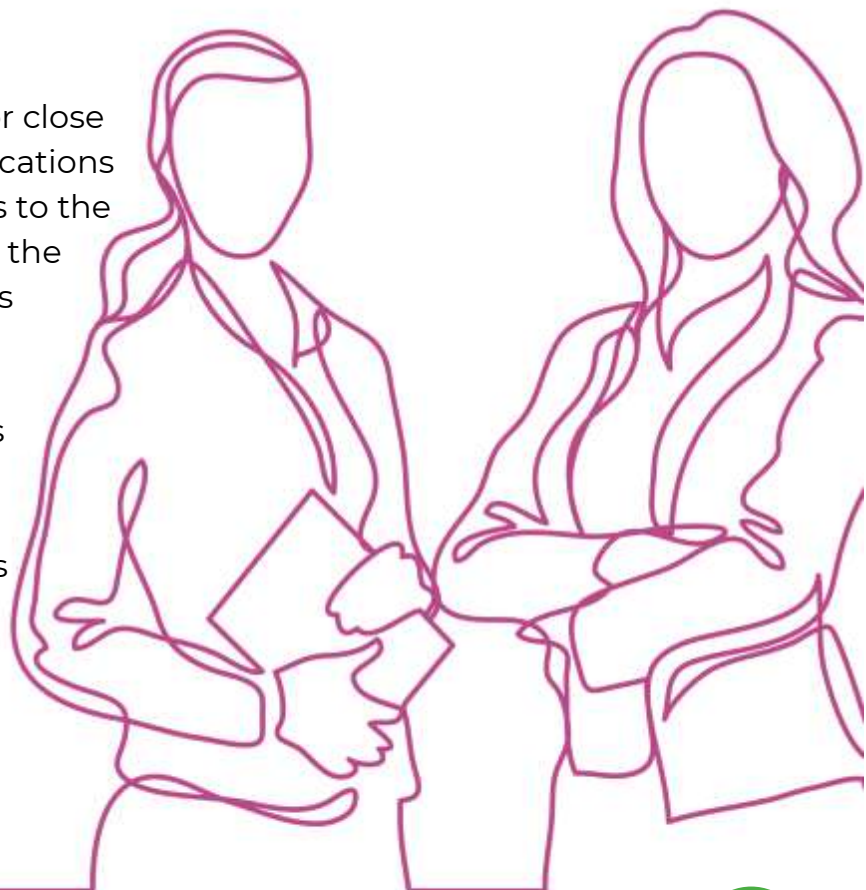
The Gillen Review Report contains over 200 recommendations that are wide-ranging and overwhelmingly welcomed by the women’s movement in Northern Ireland. One of its key recommendations is Recommendation Number 18: “**That the press and media should be party to a voluntary protocol governing how serious sexual offences are reported.**” This is especially true when reporting on rape myths.¹⁰⁷ Gillen writes:



¹⁰⁷ Northern Ireland Department of Justice (2019) [Gillen Review](#).

Raise Your Voice recommendations on media guidelines (endorsed by WPG):

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



Violence Against Women

The WPG NI welcomes the proposed legislative changes regarding domestic abuse and violence both within the Northern Ireland Assembly and in Westminster Parliament. Activists, women's organisations and support providers have spent many years calling for adequate domestic abuse legislation in Northern Ireland.

In the current global pandemic, domestic abuse and violence has sharply increased as many are put at greater risk due to the ongoing government-issued social distancing and lockdown measures. Creating adequate domestic abuse and violence legislation could not be more pertinent than it is right now. Whilst the quick action to introduce Northern Ireland-specific legislation is to be welcomed, this legislation is now over three years old and it is essential that we learn from the lessons in other jurisdictions and ensure that the women's sector are included in the application and implementation of relevant legislation moving forward.

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



Summary of Recommendations:

- * Beginning a public awareness campaign as soon as possible on the importance of responsible reporting on sexual offences, including an awareness campaign targeted at formal education institutions.
- * Ensure all awareness raising programmes in schools are in line with CEDAW General Recommendation 35, with a focus on informing and educating individuals on consent, sexual harassment and victim blaming to dismantle the belief that women and girls are responsible for their own safety.
- * We also recommend that a comprehensive, inclusive programme is developed on sex and relationships education, for all schools and third level institutions.
- * Ensure that effective measures are taken within the justice system to address high attrition and low conviction rates for sexual offences.
- * Ensure that Violence Against Women and Girls is being reported in a responsible manner across media platforms so as to discourage victim blaming and rape myths as laid out in article 17 of the Istanbul Convention¹⁰⁸.
- * Address issues with reporting gender-based violence and threats to eradicate practices of victim-blaming, perpetuating myths and suggestions that women's behaviour should change¹⁰⁹.
- * Ensure that programmes and policies dealing with the elimination of exploitation, violence and abuse contain specific actions for disabled women.
- * Remove the 'reasonable defence' clause 12
- * Introduction of Stalking legislation
- * Introduction of non-fatal and fatal strangulation legislation
- * Recognition of Violence against Women and Girls and gender-based violence in line with the Istanbul Convention
- * Grant of Secure tenancies in cases of domestic violence and abuse with recognition of the differing needs of disabled women, traveller women, trans communities, rural women, migrant women etc.

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¹⁰⁸ Council of Europe (2011) [Istanbul Convention](#)

¹⁰⁹ For example, following the misogynistic attacks on three women in South Belfast in October 2020, [PSNI advice](#) was centred around the need for women to stay indoors and not go out alone at night; rather than on the need for targeted action against misogynistic hate crime in Northern Ireland.



- * Review of the court systems in NI including criminal, civil and family courts
- * Introduce a Domestic Abuse Commissioner for Northern Ireland (already in post for England and Wales)
- * Secure funding for specialised services and a review of tendering and procurement in relation to domestic violence and abuse services
- * Provide guidelines to employers on recognising the signs of abusive behaviour
- * Fully funded programme to raise public awareness of domestic abuse
- * Tackle heteronormative assumptions and increase awareness of domestic violence within the context of LGBT+ people
- * Recognition of disproportionate impact on rural women, areas of paramilitary control, migrant women, LGBT+ groups, disabled women etc.,
- * Powers to deal with domestic abuse:
- * Introduction of domestic abuse protection order
- * Introduction of domestic abuse protection notices
- * Safer family court and child contact system
- * Improve child safety through: prohibiting unsupervised child contact for a parent on bail for domestic violence and abuse, or where there are ongoing criminal proceedings.
- * Child contact in cases of domestic abuse is based on an informed judgement on what is in the best interests of children, not the presumption of parental involvement.
- * An independent statutory review of family courts in NI to assess how they deal with domestic abuse cases to work towards consistent outcomes across NI.
- * More rigorous and innovative evidence collection approaches to support successful prosecutions including:
 - Use of the Domestic Violence register showing the number of times police have been called to the house, to build a picture of the frequency and nature of abuse (in line with CEDAW Recommendation 35 on gender-based violence),
 - Use of PSNI intelligence and evidence gathered from incidents to build a picture of coercive control as a course of conduct,
 - Use of body worn camera evidence from the scene on each occasion to effectively demonstrate the impact and seriousness of abuse. In parts of England where body worn cameras have been rolled out, there is a marked increase in the severity of sentences for domestic violence related crimes.

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- * NI has not fully implemented an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor service nine years after its recommendation; any service should be specialised and not gender-neutral and consideration should be given to the introduction of children's IDVAs and making IDVAs mandatory in police stations
- * Ensure there is effective reporting and monitoring of all section 75 groups by the PSNI to ensure the diverse needs of victims from various minority groups can be met
- * Addressing re-offending – highlighting the lack of a framework of prevention, rehabilitation and restorative justice in NI
- * Guidelines for sentencing for coercive control
- * Guidelines for measuring non-physical harm
- * Ensure victims' statements cannot be weaponised by prosecutors
- * Provide guarantees that women with uncertain immigration status can seek justice without their cases being reported to the Home Office
- * Create an inter-departmental approach for the implementation and creation of other legislation with the collaboration of the third sector
- * Provide guidance and support to frontline violence against women organisations and refuges to the needs of disabled women in danger of domestic abuse; including the communication and access needs of disabled women and reasonable adjustments,
- * Create greater flexibility in the provision of care packages, particularly for disabled women trapped in social isolation and in danger from Domestic Abuse,
- * Support particular provisions of support for disabled women in both the Domestic Abuse Bill (for example, the StaySafe East amendments) and through specific support in any miscellaneous bill to follow the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill.



Hate Crimes and Online Abuse

With the recent publication of Judge Marrinan's Northern Ireland Hate Crime Review,¹¹⁰ 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; give consideration to the recognition of sex workers as protected characteristic through consultation with sex workers groups; the recognition of the harm caused by online abuse towards women; a full review of outdated and absent legislation in Northern Ireland relating to hate crime, and more mass investment into training and education throughout the judicial system and society as a whole.

There have been 1,220 reports of online violence towards women in Northern Ireland since 2015.

(the total could be even higher than the figures suggest as not all crimes specified the gender of the victim).

In 2017-18 the PSNI saw the highest annual figure ever recorded with 433 women feeling so threatened they reported to the police – 30 of these involved death threats with another 394 constituting harassment.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Judge Marrinan (2020) '[Hate Crime Legislation in Northern Ireland: Independent Review](#)'

¹¹¹ 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.”¹¹² Berners-Lee stated that while the world has made important progress on gender equality he is “seriously concerned that online harms facing women and girls – especially those of colour, from LGBTQ+ communities and other marginalised groups – threaten that progress.” Berners-Lee said that “for many who are online, the web is simply not safe enough” and that online abuse:

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

Public figures, MPs and journalists are often particular targets of online abuse, but people who aren't in the public eye are also experiencing abuse, especially if they speak out about issues like sexism and use campaign hashtags. Several recommendations were made and can be viewed [here](#).

¹¹² Sir Tim Berners-Lee (2020) “[Why the web needs to work for women and girls](#)” Web Foundation.



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."

It is important to have the best people involved in Government representing their communities. It is not possible to achieve this if women feel excluded from these positions due to this type of misogyny and online hate.



Women make up half the population and their rights and interests cannot be adequately protected unless women are involved in positions of power and in Government. Misogynistic behaviour of this kind limits women's representation and visibility not just in politics but in other spheres and it is therefore vital that this is tackled. Online abuse against women and girls has specific implications, and often has a specific ferocity and disproportionate volume, for racialised women, LGBT+ women, and disabled women.

In a wider UK context, the MP who received the most online abuse during the 2017 election was Diane Abbott¹¹³, the first black woman to be elected MP. Further, online abuse against trans women and girls has skyrocketed in the past number of years, fuelled by animosity in the media, lack of political support, and lack of accountability for multinational social media companies.

Summary of Recommendations:

- * Introduce an adequate working definition of hate crime,
- * Create a consolidated hate crime legislation model for Northern Ireland,
- * Replacing the enhanced sentencing model with the statutory aggravation model,
- * Apply the statutory aggravation model to all protected characteristics,
- * Introduce specific guidelines and extensive programmes of training and education on any new model of hate crime legislation; including what the protected characteristics are and the consequences of committing a hate crime,

(continued on next page)

¹¹³ Amnesty International (2017) '[Unsocial Media: Tracking Twitter Abuse against Women MPs](#)', Amnesty Insights



- * Recognising gender as a protected characteristic through specifically treating misogyny as a standalone hate crime,
- * Recognise transgender identity a protected characteristic,
- * Recognise intersex identity as a protected characteristic,
- * Create a legal framework that recognises the importance of intersectionality to adequately reflect the experiences and identities of victims and motivations of perpetrators,
- * Require the court to state if offences are aggravated, reflect this on court records and outline the difference the aggravation had on sentencing,
- * Record aggravated offences on criminal justice records,
- * Create a statutory legal definition of “hostility”,
- * Add equivalent provisions to Sections 4, 4A and 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 to the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987,
- * Remove “dwelling” defences,
- * Include all protected groups under the stirring up provisions of the Public Order (NI) Order 1987,
- * Recognise the severe harm caused by online hate speech against women,
- * Update and amend existing legislation dealing with public order, malicious communications and harassment to reflect the changing nature of communications due to social media,
- * Ensure online harm is fully covered within hate crime legislation,
- * Strengthen law relating to public authorities tackling hate expressions in public spaces,
- * Implement victim-led restorative justice programmes in collaboration with community-based organisations,
- * Commission extensive research specific to Northern Ireland to tackle the under-reporting of hate crime and mistrust from minorities in reporting services,
- * Adequately fund and expand the Hate Crime Advocacy Scheme,
- * Restrict the press reporting of hate crime victims where appropriate,
- * Create measures for legislative consolidations and scrutiny.



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 Executive Office. 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

We recognise that a number of issues raised in this report are of relevance to other NI Departments. However, if these are to be addressed fully and effectively, an inter-departmental approach is crucial, which is why they have been included in this report for the Executive Office.

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

As a matter of urgency, the Executive Office should:

- * Consider the gendered impact of all decision-making relating to COVID-19 recovery planning, and work with the women's sector to develop ways to mitigate against this impact.

Approve and support the following measures to be introduced by the Department of Health:

- * Ensure sexual and reproductive healthcare services are available 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.

**Women's
Policy Group NI**

February 2021