

# Women's Policy Group NI

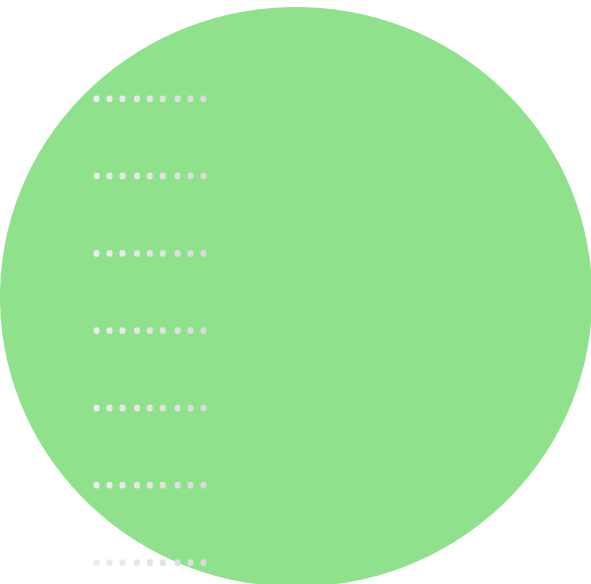
## COVID-19 FEMINIST RECOVERY PLAN

### Capital Investment

#### Recommendations:

Strategic Investment Board

*Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2021*



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# Women's Policy Group NI

## 1. Women's Policy Group (WPG) NI: Introduction

This report is based on evidence and recommendations contained within the NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan, which was 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.*

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**The content of the Feminist Recovery 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:**

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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)

## 2. WPG NI Feminist Recovery Plan: Introduction

The WPG NI 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. The plan makes a number of 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. Our full Feminist Recovery Plan is available [here](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women for a number of reasons; including but not limited to: women are more likely to be employed in part-time precarious work (such as in the hospitality industry, which has been one of the most affected industries during the pandemic), are more likely to be employed in 'front-line' work such as health and social care, and are more likely to live in poverty.

Furthermore, although the pandemic has created new issues for women across Northern Ireland, it has also exacerbated and brought into sharp focus many pre-existing gender inequalities in our society. For example, the over-reliance on unpaid care work, which is predominantly undertaken by women. Research from Carers NI shows that Northern Ireland's carers save the economy £4.6 billion per year; whilst unpaid carers across all the UK provide social care worth £57 billion per year<sup>1</sup>.

The WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan highlights the urgent need for adequate government investment in the women's sector, in order to address these pre-existing inequalities and disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women. Specifically, it calls for gender-budgeting to be used in all economic decision-making, and identifies particular groups within the women's sector which are particularly in need of investment, such as rural women.

This report recommends a number of ways in which investment through the ISNI could mitigate against the deficits and inequalities currently experienced by women in Northern Ireland, which have become exacerbated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the majority of recommendations contained in this report relate to deficits in capital funding, a number of recommendations relate to resourcing costs. We note that the ISNI is limited to allocated capital funding; however, these have been included as they are necessary in order to achieve particular recommendations relating to capital funding.

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

### 3. Issues with previous Investment Strategy (2011-2021)

The 2011- 2021 Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) made almost no reference to women throughout the 56-page report<sup>2</sup>. This is despite consistent evidence being produced by women’s sector groups illustrating the need for a gendered approach to economic decision-making, in light of the gendered nature of economic policies. The Equality Impact Assessment for the ISNI<sup>3</sup> (2012) concluded that “the impact of the recent economic downturn on men has been greater than on women” and that “although young women have also experienced a sharp increase in unemployment, the recession has not had such a direct impact in terms of job losses when compared to men.” It goes on to say that “there is no gender pay gap” and that “there is no evidence of adverse impact on men or women generally<sup>4</sup>.” These conclusions do not reflect the economic reality experienced by women in Northern Ireland.

As highlighted by the WPG NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan, the gender pay gap very much exists in Northern Ireland; with women continuing to earn less on average than men<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, extensive research shows that the 2008 financial crash and subsequent austerity policies had a disproportionate impact on women, due to a range of societal factors that make women more vulnerable to these policies. For example, women are more likely to be recipients of social welfare, 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.

All of these factors compound to make women more vulnerable to the effects of economic crises; which was seen after the 2008 financial crash and is now being seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the 2008 financial crash, research shows that 86% of savings to the Treasury, from the tax and benefit changes since 2010, came from women.<sup>6</sup> The WPG Feminist Recovery Plan offers extensive evidence regarding the impact of austerity and the impact of Universal Credit on women, including reports by the Women’s Regional Consortium<sup>7</sup>, which should be consulted by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB).

The Equality Impact Assessment (2012) also concluded that the reason men on average earn more from work in their lifetime was because women experience “more interrupted working lives,” without recognising this as an issue that should be addressed. Women’s employment is more likely than men’s to be impacted by having a child because women are more likely to be forced to care for children, either in addition to their work, or instead of paid work. However, this is not an inevitable reality, and carefully targeted investment in the women’s sector and gender-budgeting could change this; allowing increased numbers of women to access the labour market and enjoy less “interrupted” working lives.

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<sup>2</sup> [Investment Strategy](#) for Northern Ireland 2011-2021

<sup>3</sup> ISNI [Equality Impact Assessment](#) at a Strategic Level – Public Consultation Document (2012, p 38 and 39.)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. (2).

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, L (2020) “How Unequal? The unadjusted gender pay gap” – [Nevin Economic Research Institute Report](#).

<sup>6</sup> Cracknell, R. and Keen, R. (2017) “[Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes](#)” Commons Briefing Papers SN06758

<sup>7</sup> Women’s Regional Consortium (2019) “[Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women’s Perspectives](#)”

## 4. Gender Budgeting

Throughout the Feminist Recovery Plan, the WPG calls for gender budgeting to be used in all economic decision-making, particularly in COVID-19 economic recovery planning. The evidence and recommendations contained in the Plan highlight the economic, social, health and political merits of applying gendered thinking and gender budgeting to policy decisions. It is crucial that gender budgeting is used in the drafting of the next ISNI, so that the differing needs and priorities of women are addressed in a gender-sensitive way.

According to the UK Women's Budget Group (WBG), gender budgeting is "a way of analysing the budget for its effect on gender equality<sup>8</sup>." This means considering the particular impacts of economic policies on women, who are already economically disadvantaged in a number of ways. For example, economic policies should be analysed in regards to how they might impact the current gender pay gap, how they impact gender segregated labour markets, and how they impact particularly vulnerable groups such as lone parents, the majority of whom are women. Economic policies should also be examined in regards to their impact on unpaid, part-time work, as well as care work, as women make up the majority of workers from these groups.

Effective gender budgeting will also take into account the intersectional needs of all women; as various characteristics can compound and exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities. For example, disabled women, rural women, economically disadvantaged women, minority ethnic women, trans women and LGBT women will experience gender inequality differently to economically advantaged white, cis-heterosexual women, and will face additional barriers. Therefore, the individual and intersectional needs of these groups should be considered when using gender budgeting as a tool for economic policy analysis.

Gender budgeting does not mean creating separate budgets for women and men. Rather, it aims to promote "gender-sensitive budgets" which "recognise the different situation and needs of women and men and aim to promote gender equality<sup>9</sup>." In order to fully understand the impact of economic policies on women, which is not always initially clear, it is crucial that women's sector organisations are consulted with, who can provide specialist advice and information regarding the impact on various groups of women. Gender budgeting is an essential step in creating a more gender equal society. If this tool is used correctly, it allows for more effective, efficient, and transparent economic policy, which will benefit all of society, not just women.

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<sup>8</sup> UK Women's Budget Group, "[What is Gender Responsive Budgeting?](#)" [Website]

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## 5. Areas of Concern

This section will address some of the key areas highlighted in the Feminist Recovery Plan which are particularly in need of capital investment. These issues have been divided under the relevant 6 pillars of the upcoming ISNI, and provide important information regarding deficits which exist in the funding of Section 75 groups.

### 4.1 Skills/Education and Learning

#### Childcare

The Women's Policy Group supports the [Childcare for All Campaign](#) and believes that a universal, free and high-quality childcare provision, which meets the diverse needs of children, is essential for economic recovery in Northern Ireland<sup>10</sup>. Women are more likely to be forced to care for children, either in addition to their work, or instead of paid work. Therefore, the provision of childcare is fundamental to facilitating women's participation and ability to access paid work, education and training and progressing gender equality in paid and unpaid work. The WPG believes that childcare should be treated as a public good, rather than a private family matter, that is preventing many women from working. The Women's Policy Group supports the Childcare for All Campaign and believes that a universal, free and high-quality childcare provision, which meets the diverse needs of children, is essential for economic recovery in Northern Ireland.

Childcare is a key part of our economic infrastructure and is a necessary prerequisite for people being able to return to work, particularly women. The lack of an adequate childcare provision in Northern Ireland means that women continue to face barriers to accessing work, education and training, and more women will have to work outside the home, or struggle with unemployment. As well as having an impact on women's economic participation, accessible and affordable childcare is also fundamental to facilitating women's full and equal participation in society. Without it, their access to education and training is also restricted.

Research suggests that as many as 10,000 childcare settings may be unable to reopen after COVID-19, with roughly 75% blaming financial difficulties for this and 25% referencing fears of parents being able to afford or need the childcare they had previously employed<sup>11</sup>. Research from the Nevin Economic Research Institute found that despite the fact that 40% of families in Northern Ireland (around 350,000 workers) have dependent children, little consideration appears to be given to the misalignment between the reopening of many sectors of our economy while childcare options remain extremely limited<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Employers for Childcare conclusions from 2020 Childcare Survey can be found [here](#).

<sup>11</sup> See: Richard Adams (April 2020), '[UK childcare industry 'crushed' by coronavirus crisis](#)', *The Guardian*, see also: Christine Berry, (May 2020), '[If we need childcare to reopen the UK economy, why is it so undervalued?](#)', *The Guardian*

<sup>12</sup> Dr Lisa Wilson, (May 2020), '[Employment and access to childcare during the Covid-19 crisis](#)', *Nevin Economic Research Institute*, p.3.



The rising costs of childcare are of deep concern, particularly in the context of Covid-19 and the economic consequences we are already seeing as a result of it. Research from the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey in 2019<sup>13</sup> shows that the average cost of a full-time childcare place is £166 per week or £8,632 per year. This is an increase of 11% since 2010 when the first NI Childcare Survey was conducted.

The gendered nature of this issue is evidenced by the fact that five years after a child's birth, only 13% of mums have increased earnings compared to 26% of dads<sup>14</sup>. Women's employment is also most likely to be affected, with 56.2% of mothers having to make a change to their employment due to childcare, compared to 22.4% of fathers<sup>15</sup>. 45% of mothers attributed a change in their working hours to the cost of childcare. Furthermore, 87% of men in paid work were full-time workers compared to 59% of women<sup>16</sup>. The gender pay gap largely exists due to a disproportionate number of women being involved in part-time employment, as a result of having childcare responsibility. For example, 59% of women were found to be in full-time paid work, compared to 87% of men. Therefore, it is clear that a gendered approach is essential to tackling what is clearly a gendered issue.

The childcare model in Northern Ireland has one of the lowest levels of public provision in the UK. In contrast, 75% of childcare in Scotland is council-run and funded by government. The underinvestment and gender segregation in the sector shows that care work is both an underpaid and undervalued profession, despite how critical this work is to the functioning of our economy. The median annual gross pay for childcare workers is almost half of that compared to the average of all workers (£11,028 compared to £21,254). Almost half of all childcare workers earn below the real living wage (48%). This is a significantly higher figure than the proportion of all workers who earn below the real living wage (30%). Significant action needs to be taken in order to bring workers into the childcare sector, maintain staff morale and reduce turnover, and reward workers' skills and experience.

NI Executive commitments in the New Decade, New Approach Agreement include commitments to reduce carbon emissions, to work to transition to a zero-carbon society, and support clean and inclusive growth as part of a Green New Deal. Childcare, and care more generally, is an already existing sustainable, green industry, with low levels of pollution and carbon emissions. This sector should be adequately funded, as part of a Green New Deal, and should be regarded as a key sustainable industry, in which workers are valued and paid a liveable wage.

Northern Ireland still does not have a childcare strategy, nor a childcare provision, despite commitments in New Decade, New Approach. The childcare sector is one facing a sustainability crisis and deep gender segregation. Focus needs to be placed on creating greater diversity within the sector to support the needs of BME families and children with disabilities, to remove stereotypes of working in childcare being seen as a "woman's job",

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<sup>13</sup> Employers for Childcare (2019), '[Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019](#)'

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> ONS (2019) [Families and the Labour Market](#), p.6.

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.
- \* 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.
- \* Work extensively with the women's sector and childcare sector in the development of this funded childcare strategy and childcare provision for Northern Ireland.
- \* 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.

## 4.2 Productive

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### **Rural Women**

Gender inequality is amplified for women in rural areas due to Access Poverty<sup>17</sup>. The accessibility of education, training, work and childcare provision and the cost and availability of public transport are factors in determining women's participation; particularly in rural areas<sup>18</sup>. Women in Northern Ireland remain under-represented in public and political life<sup>19</sup> and rural women's participation in public and political life is further hindered by geography and distance from decision making spaces.

Even within the wider women's sector, rural women still need a stronger voice and increased Government funding<sup>20</sup>. Although rural women make up 40% of all women in Northern Ireland, rural women's groups received only 1.3% Government funding for service delivery to women's groups, with the rest going towards urban women 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

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

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

<sup>19</sup> NI Assembly [Briefing Paper](#) (2014) 'Women and Public Appointments in NI'

<sup>20</sup> Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015)

this Consortium work concluded<sup>21</sup> 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 impacts<sup>12</sup> to ensure the inequity of Government resourcing does not continue. NI Government funding support for the work of the only dedicated regional service to support rural women in their communities (NIRWN) is now 13% of what it was in 2007. Furthermore, as a result of Brexit, we will no longer have access to EU Rural Development funding and policy development, and we have no indigenous rural development policy of our own. This development has been halted to prioritise dealing with the pandemic, but the timeline for the Protocol<sup>22</sup> implementation remains unchanged.

As labour relocates to a home working context, rural areas will suffer disproportionately from inferior access to high quality broadband.<sup>23</sup> This weakness will also affect homeschooling during closures and be exacerbated by concurrent demands for limited available bandwidth (data transfer capacity) among multiple household members<sup>24</sup>. Throughout the EU, women are predominantly responsible for childcare<sup>25</sup> and home schooling is likely to have gendered implications within families. Female rural entrepreneurs and women who have undertaken farm diversification initiatives have often done so to fit around their other childcare and caring responsibilities<sup>26</sup>. Maintaining these businesses while undertaking additional COVID-19 caring roles will be a challenge. These gendered effects could mean differential access to household assets that can be used to buffer the effects of the coronavirus on firms.

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, the trajectory of rural development has changed, and so must we, in order to help rural entrepreneurs cope with economic stresses amid the pandemic. Whilst the rural voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector is adept at balancing social, economic and environmental needs, it has been heavily stretched in the years leading up to the pandemic and now faces even more challenges<sup>27</sup>. There is a need for governments to view organisations in this sector in a similar light to private and public businesses and employees, providing financial support to sustain their viability. These

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<sup>21</sup> Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015) [Unpublished]

<sup>22</sup> UK Government [Northern Ireland Protocol](#)

<sup>23</sup> Commission for Rural Communities (2013) ['Rural Micro-Businesses: What Makes Some Thrive in a Challenging Economic Climate?'](#)

<sup>24</sup> Phillipson, J., Gorton, M., Turner, R., et. al. (2020) ['The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Implications for Rural Economies'](#)

<sup>25</sup> Erhel, C.; Guergoat-Larivière, M. Labor Market Regimes, Family Policies, and Women's Behavior in the EU. *Fem. Econ.* 2013, 19, 76-109.

<sup>26</sup> Shortall, S.; Sutherland, L.; McKee, A.; Hopkins, J. Women in Farming and the Agriculture Sector; Scottish Government: Edinburgh, Scotland, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Milbourne, L.; Cushman, M. (2015) ['Complying, Transforming or Resisting in the New Austerity? Realigning Social Welfare and Independent Action among English Voluntary Organisations.'](#) *Journal of Social Policy*, 44, 463-485

demands need external support, but the VCSE sector often falls between business, charity and household policy frameworks<sup>28</sup>.

COVID-19 has demonstrated the imperative for community capacity building and support through the rural VCSE sector, to allow it to help individuals, households and communities during the pandemic and recovery. This is the opportune time to increase rural women's participation in the digital economy, including digital marketing and digital trade. Of course, this means that the necessary enablers must first be addressed, such as increasing digital identification for rural small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to allow new ways of securing collateral and credit histories. With the social distancing phenomena, the era of gathering rural people in groups for capacity building will end. Development organisations should adapt to ICT-based capacity building. This includes providing digital, virtual, and mobile-based business training, coaching, and mentoring related to economic recovery, digital marketing and communication channels, and overall digital financial literacy.

#### *Summary of Recommendations:*

- \* Proposed budgets, PfG and policy recovery plans take account of rural needs.
- \* Historic underinvestment in rural women is recognised and efforts made to redress when future resourcing is being planned.
- \* Rural women are engaged in future rural development policy planning and development.
- \* Rural women have dedicated rural development resourcing that takes account of gender differentials and Covid-19 impacts.
- \* NI Executive work quickly on ensuring we have a future Rural Development policy that supports vibrant, gender equal, rural communities.
- \* Government to view organisations in this sector in a similar light to private and public businesses and employees, providing financial support to sustain their viability.
- \* Resourcing and support for rural community capacity building to aid Covid-19 recovery and sustainability.
- \* Rural business support initiatives are required.
- \* Increase digital identification for rural SMEs to allow innovative ways of securing collateral and credit histories.
- \* This includes providing digital, virtual, and mobile-based business training, coaching, and mentoring related to economic recovery, digital marketing and communication channels, and overall digital financial literacy.

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<sup>28</sup> Agapitova, N.; Sanchez, B.; Tinsley, E. (2017) '[Government Support to the Social Enterprise Sector: Comparative Review of Policy Frameworks and Tools.](#)' The World Bank: Washington, DC, USA.

## Women in Decision-Making and Public Life

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 women<sup>29</sup> found that many feel disempowered, have difficulty circumnavigating community gate-keepers (including paramilitary groups) and fear harm if they were to speak out. The 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 decision-making processes. Already, we have seen recovery planning take place with little to no consultation with the women's sector, who have been consistently producing evidence of the disproportionate impact COVID-19 is having on women.

It is imperative that women are included in the COVID-19 recovery planning and 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.

### *Summary of Recommendations:*

- \* Ensure women's groups are adequately represented in all departmental COVID-19 recovery planning procedures.
- \* Ensure the women's sector is consulted with and included in the co-design of all budgets, departmental strategies and the Programme for Government.
- \* Address obstacles to participation including financial constraints and lack of encouragement for women into male-dominated spheres of work.

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<sup>29</sup> [Council of Europe Convention](#) on the prevention and combating violence against women and girls.

## 4.3 Networks

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### Transport

It is crucial that the differing transport needs of women are taken into account when creating transport plans; particularly given issues in Northern Ireland of inadequate rural public transport and the fact that women are more likely to rely on public transport than men. As previously mentioned, the cost and availability of public transport are important factors in determining women's participation in social and economic life; particularly in rural areas. This includes their ability to provide care, and access education, training, work, childcare, and healthcare.

### Digital Divide

Access to digital technologies is still limited in Northern Ireland, primarily due to uneven broadband access and coverage, especially in rural areas. Many women, in particular older women, also report lack of skills and confidence in using technology. Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP) hosted a conference on CEDAW in January 2020, featuring CEDAW Committee vice chair Nicole Ameline as keynote speaker. In her keynote, Mme Ameline highlighted the gender aspects of the digital divide and emphasised that women and girls need to be fully engaged in the development of technology, including artificial intelligence. Mme Ameline emphasised the risks of artificial intelligence, as current evidence indicates algorithms are male oriented and often produce discriminatory results for women in all spheres of life, from assessing eligibility for loans or credit cards to accessing social protection. This is also true when it comes to the use of facial recognition technologies (where it is allowed) as women are more likely to be misidentified.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the gender aspects of the digital divide, with reports of mothers struggling to support their children's education on mobile phones, and teenagers scrambling to complete schoolwork on mobiles or a single family laptop. Older women are among the groups least likely to be digitally connected and computer literate, although efforts were made to address this particularly during the pandemic. Newcomer, asylum seeking and refugee families also face challenges in accessing affordable internet services, which are critical for them to maintain contact with their extended families and through this, support their health and wellbeing<sup>30</sup>.

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.

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<sup>30</sup> See the [Participation and Practice of Rights \(PPR\) campaign](#) 'Internet Access for All' with 670 signatures [as of 07.01.21]

## Summary of Recommendations:

- \* 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.

## 4.4 Health and Social Care

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### Care Work

Women in Northern Ireland are more likely than men to be forced out of the labour market by unpaid, domestic work or caring responsibilities, and 69% of carers are women. Research from Carers NI shows that Northern Ireland's carers save the economy £4.6 billion per year<sup>31</sup>; whilst unpaid carers across all the UK provide social care worth £57 billion per year<sup>32</sup>. The burden on women to provide the majority of unpaid care in society has increased significantly in the context of Covid-19. Care work, which is predominantly undertaken by women and girls, is central to economic functioning; yet it is still treated as a private issue and remains undervalued and underfunded.

A report by the UK Women's Budget Group (WBG) and Commission on a Gender Equal Economy titled 'Creating a Caring Economy: A Call to Action'<sup>33</sup> highlights the necessity of creating a caring economy for Northern Ireland, and calls on all levels of government to act to make this a reality. In this report, a "caring economy" is defined as "an economy which puts people and planet first...prioritises care of one another and the environment... everyone gives and receives care on the basis of their capacities and needs...ensures that everyone has time to care, as well as time free from care."

The report advocates for the long-term reconstruction of Northern Ireland's economy to deal with the current problems it faces in regards to affordable and accessible care provision. Among its many findings, the report shows that women earn less and save less on average than men, women make up 60% of unpaid care work, and minority ethnic and disabled women are most affected by the precarious nature of paid and unpaid care work. In general, it found that care work is low status and low paid in today's economy, despite the fact that care is an essential part of life, and most of us will either rely on it or become a provider of care at some point in our lives.

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<sup>31</sup> Carers NI (2015), '[NI Carers save government £4.6 billion a year](#)'; see also: Carers NI (2017) '[State of Caring 2017](#)'

<sup>32</sup> Office for National Statistics (2017), '[Unpaid carers provide social care worth £57 billion](#)'

<sup>33</sup> '[Creating a Caring Economy: A Call To Action](#)' Report by Commission on a Gender Equality Economy and UK Women's Budget Group (2020)

The measures being recommended in this report are not only to benefit the lives of women, but to improve society for everyone. Although women make up the majority of unpaid and paid carers, all of society relies on this work and benefits from this work, both socially and economically. By introducing a 'Caring Economy' in Northern Ireland, the government could facilitate the growth of a stronger, more sustainable, and more resilient economy, that benefits not just women but everyone. The pandemic has shown that care and more specifically, childcare, are at the core of our economy, and without adequate accessible and affordable provision, the rest of the economy suffers.

*"Good-quality care services, such as adult social care, healthcare and childcare are critical for a good economy. But a caring economy extends beyond care services: it involves caring about the pay and conditions of workers, acting together to end discrimination, deprivation and poverty and eliminate violence and abuse, and caring about the planet on which we live together. A caring economy means acting together to improve wellbeing rather than to maximise economic growth<sup>34</sup>."*

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 policies. The care industry is also a key sustainable industry; whereby, investment in care is three times less polluting per job than the equivalent investment in the construction industry<sup>35</sup> Therefore, by investing in a caring economy, it would allow government to address issues of gender equality, sustainability and well-being simultaneously.

#### *Summary of Recommendations:*

- \* Analyse the economic value of putting money into caring, which will help carers get back into paid employment and 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.
- \* 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.
- \* 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.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 5.



## 4.5 Social/Community

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### Racial Justice

The New Decade New Approach Agreement<sup>36</sup> 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 crimes<sup>37</sup> for the first time in the history of Northern Ireland. More recently, the PSNI recorded 936 racist incidents including 626 racist crimes<sup>38</sup> 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.

The WPG supports 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.

The WPG are calling for the urgent creation and implementation of a fully funded 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.

#### Summary of Recommendations:

- \* Develop a fully funded Racial Equality Strategy and incorporate accountability mechanisms into the Programme for Government to address systemic racism.
- \* Complete and publish meaningful and comprehensive equality impact assessments of all COVID-19 policy decisions, including economic policy decisions, informed by intersectional data.
- \* 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 (relevant to DoJ given its roots in racial inequality).

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<sup>36</sup> [New Decade New Approach Agreement](#), p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> Police Service of Northern Ireland [Trends in Hate Motivated Incidents and Crimes Recorded](#) by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2017/18 Annual Bulletin published 31 October 2018, p.6

<sup>38</sup> [Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation](#) Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland Update to 31 March 2020 p.4

## Rape Culture and Violence Against Women

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<sup>39</sup>, this will not be carried out until 2022. Before then, a public awareness campaign should begin in formal educational institutions, specifically schools and third level organisations, and such a programme must deal with issues around consent and boundaries, in an age-appropriate manner.

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.

### 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 that effective measures are taken within the justice system to address high attrition and low conviction rates for sexual offences.
- \* 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.
- \* 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
- \* Fully funded programme to raise public awareness of domestic abuse
- \* Recognition of disproportionate impact on rural women, areas of paramilitary control, migrant women, LGBT+ groups, disabled women etc.,
- \* An independent statutory review of family courts in NI to assess how they deal with domestic abuse cases to work towards consistent outcomes across NI.
- \* More rigorous and innovative evidence collection approaches to support successful prosecutions including:

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<sup>39</sup> NI Justice Department (2020) Gillen Review: [Implementation Plan](#).

- 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.
- \* Provide guidance and support, including financial 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,

## Hate Crimes and Online Abuse

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; 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<sup>40</sup>. 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.<sup>41</sup>” 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.”

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. 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.

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<sup>40</sup> ITV News (2018), ‘[Reports of Online Violence Towards Women in NI](#)’ [article]

<sup>41</sup> Sir Tim Berners-Lee (2020) “[Why the web needs to work for women and girls](#)” *Web Foundation*.

Public figures, MPs and journalists are often particular targets of online abuse, but people who aren't in the public eye are also experiencing abuse, especially if they speak out about issues like sexism and use campaign hashtags. In the independent review of hate crime in Northern Ireland, Judge Marrinan acknowledged the issue of hateful abuse online as part of this Review citing the abuse that many women politicians both in Westminster and locally in the Northern Ireland Assembly have to endure often on a daily basis. This is a significant issue as it has led to the resignation of a number of women MPs in recent years with obvious impacts for gender equality and ensuring that the voices of women in politics are heard. 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.

#### Summary of Recommendations:

- \* 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,
- \* 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,

## 4.6 Environment

### **A Feminist Green Economy**

The NI Executive commitments to 'tackle climate change head on with a strategy to address the immediate and longer-term impacts of climate change' in the New Decade, New Approach agreement<sup>42</sup> must be met from a perspective that will support tackling gender inequality.

The lockdown exposed the severe impact of governmental decisions to neglect public services on our society, with many existing socio-economic inequalities being exacerbated during the lockdown. The need for basic levels of income, access to food, childcare, a fully-functioning health service, education, changing considerations of "low-skilled" work to essential work, recognising the importance of unpaid care, digital poverty, holiday hunger, access to the internet and many more factors have been the topic of a lot of conversations in recent months. Now, more than ever, it is necessary to reassess our economic decision

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<sup>42</sup> [New Decade, New Approach Agreement](#), p.8

making and recent history of severely under-resourced public goods, as part of a Green New Deal for Northern Ireland (NI). 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.

The WPG endorse taking an intersectional feminist perspective to a Green New Deal for Northern Ireland in relation to our economic recovery and the NI Executive's aims for tackling climate change. The UK Women's Budget Group and Women's Environmental Network paper for the WBG Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, '*Towards a Feminist Green New Deal for the UK*'<sup>43</sup> outlines some ideas of what a Feminist Green New Deal might look like:

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

The WPG would 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 Security<sup>44</sup>.

### **Summary of Recommendations:**

- \* Co-designing social infrastructure at a local level with the needs of women taken into account,
- \* Taking the differing transport needs of women with caring responsibilities into account when creating transport plans; particularly given issues in Northern Ireland of inadequate rural public transport and the fact that women are more likely to rely on public transport.
- \* Provide subsidies and other incentives, including paid education leave, to support women, particularly low-income and BAME women, in accessing training and development programmes in high-skilled work in a new green economy,
- \* Provide subsidies and other incentives to those working in jobs at high risk of being replaced by automaton, particularly as women are at much higher risk of this,
- \* Encourage women and girls into male-dominated green sectors that are encouraged through a Northern Ireland Green New Deal.

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<sup>43</sup> Maeve Cohen and Sherilyn MacGregor (2020), '[Towards a Feminist Green New Deal for the UK: A Paper for the WBG Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy](#)', *UK Women's Budget Group and Women's Environmental Network*

<sup>44</sup> United Nations Security Council: [Resolution 1325](#) (UNSCR 1325) Women, Peace and Security.

- \* Broaden definitions of 'green jobs' beyond construction and technology to incorporate the care sector as an already existing low carbon, high compense sector that is increasingly neglected,
- \* Ensure that all green jobs in Northern Ireland include a real living wage, are securely contracted, ethically procured and unionised,
- \* 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 disproportionately impacted by different food standards to Great Britain post-Brexit,
- \* Supporting and developing sustainable small businesses that reduce domestic work through mass preparation and distribution of locally grown food.
- \* 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.

## 6. Conclusion

The WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan provides an extensive overview of the ways in which women have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 in Northern Ireland, and we would encourage the SIB to consult this [document](#) in their process of 'mapping the deficits' for the upcoming ISNI.

This report has recommended a number of ways in which investment through the ISNI could mitigate against the deficits and inequalities currently experienced by women in Northern Ireland, which have become exacerbated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The WPG notes that the SIB previously committed to consulting on annual drafts of the last ISNI and monitoring the equality impacts of this strategy, but did not fulfil these commitments. We call on the SIB to renew these commitments in regards to the upcoming ISNI, and fulfil them over the course of this new strategy.

The 2021 ISNI has the potential to transform the experience of women across Northern Ireland, and contribute significantly to the elimination of gender inequality, which is still highly prevalent in our society. Northern Ireland is renowned for having a strong and co-ordinated women's sector<sup>45</sup>, something which the SIB should take full advantage of by engaging in a meaningful way with these groups in drafting the upcoming ISNI.

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<sup>45</sup> Thomson, J. (2017). Thinking globally, acting locally? The women's sector, international human rights mechanisms and politics in Northern Ireland. *Politics*, 37(1), 82-96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395716629973>