

Women's Policy Group NI

WPG Response to the Department of Finance Draft Budget for 2021-2022, Department Equality Screenings/EQIAs and Draft PfG Outcomes Framework

25th February 2021

Introduction:

The [Women's Policy Group Northern Ireland](#) (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 and how the Budget and Programme for Government should address this. Several members of the WPG are also submitting responses on behalf of their own organisations to the draft PfG Outcomes Framework consultation, the 2021-2022 draft Budget consultation, or subsequent departmental equality and human rights screenings or EQIAs relating to the draft Budget. This response from the WPG will summarise the collective work published recently by the WPG that relate to the draft budget and equality screenings; particularly the WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan¹ which was published in July 2020. This response will also make brief comment on the draft PfG Outcomes Framework.

¹ Women's Policy Group (2020), 'COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan', <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WPG-NI-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-2020-.pdf>

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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:

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)

Specifically, this response will relate to the following consultations:

- Consultation on the Draft Budget 2021-2022 (DoF)
- Consultation on the draft (PfG) Outcomes Framework (TEO)
- Department for Communities draft Budget 2021-2022 Equality Impact Assessment
- Department of Health High Level Equality Screening Budget 2021-2022
- Department of Justice Draft Budget 2021-2022 Overview and Equality Impacts
- Department of Education 2021-2022 Resource Budget Equality and Human Rights Screening
- Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Appendix A Draft Budget Equality and Human Rights Screening Template

In addition to this response, the WPG will be sending a supplementary bespoke summary of the Feminist Recovery Plan to each Minister and Department highlighting the specific evidence and recommendations as they relate to the remit of each department. These reports will provide a much more comprehensive analysis of evidence relating to the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women, pre-existing inequalities that have been exacerbated, commitments by the NI Assembly that need to be addressed and further recommendations on how to advance gender equality.

The departmental summaries of the Feminist Recovery Plan also relate to what the WPG believes should be priority areas in the 2021-2022 Budget and Programme for Government. The WPG would be happy to present our evidence to each of the Departmental Committees and Ministers.

We would also like to endorse the responses to this consultation from our members in the women's sector, including the Women's Regional Consortium and the NI Women's Budget Group. Further, many members of the Women's Policy Group are also members of the Equality Coalition, and we would like to endorse their submission in relation to the draft Programme for Government and draft Budget, including Departmental screening/EQIA on February 2021.

We hope to see our consultation response reflected in the final Budget agreed by the NI Executive and in the final Programme for Government.

For questions or queries regarding this consultation response/endorsement, please contact Rachel Powell, Women's Sector Lobbyist, rachel.powell@Wrda.net.

Signed,

Women's Policy Group NI

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General Comments:

The WPG welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Draft Budget 2021-2022 and subsequent equality screenings/EQIAs, particularly as we have produced a wide range of evidence and policy recommendations on how the NI Executive can respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in a manner that not only mitigates against the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women, but also further advance gender equality in Northern Ireland. However, we do have significant concerns about the lack of appropriate time to respond to the Draft Budget and subsequent equality and human rights/screenings and EQIAs. Our recommendations on how to meaningfully engage with women when conducting public consultations will be expanded on in detail in the following section of this response.

Programme for Government:

Whilst we appreciate the merit in incorporating an outcomes-based approach into a Programme for Government, the ongoing consultation on the Programme for Government Outcomes Framework (launched on 25th January 2021) provides no commitment to consult on an actual Programme for Government.

Under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and its implementation law, the NI Executive is responsible for annually seeking to agree and review a Programme for Government “incorporating an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes”². Despite being over a year on since the NI Executive was restored in January 2020, and a draft outline PfG was negotiated and included in the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement, there is still no agreed PfG. The WPG is extremely concerned with this given that there is only one year remaining in the current Assembly term. The draft PfG that was established through NDNA included commitments to tackle disadvantage and drive economic growth “on the basis of objective need” underpinned by “key supporting strategies”³.

The WPG notes that progress has been made through expert-led advisory groups and co-design working groups, of which several WPG members have been involved in, to develop the Gender Equality Strategy, Disability Strategy, LGBTQI+ Strategy and Anti-Poverty Strategy.

However, without the specific adoption of these crucial social inclusion strategies within the PfG, the work of these expert-led community groups and development of these strategies are at risk of being blocked by individual Ministers through the ‘St. Andrews veto’. This is particularly concerning given the time-bound implementation of these strategies and the recent use of the St. Andrews Veto to block public health measures in relation to the ongoing pandemic. Therefore,

² See Section 20(3) of the Northern Ireland Act (1998), with reference to paragraph 20 of strand 1 of the GFA which reads: “20. *The Executive Committee will seek to agree each year, and review as necessary, a programme incorporating an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes, subject to approval by the Assembly, after scrutiny in Assembly Committees, on a cross-community basis.*”

³ NDNA, Annex D Programme for Government, paragraphs 4.1, 4.6.

the WPG is concerned that an “outcomes-based” PfG framework creates a risk of crucial social inclusion strategies not being implemented in this Assembly term.

In addition to this, the WPG would also like to raise our concerns about other strategies still not being developed, despite time-bound commitments in NDNA. For instance, there has been no progress made clear to the public on the development of the Racial Equality Strategy, Childcare Strategy or Climate Change Strategy. The launch of a consultation on an Outcomes-Framework for a Programme for Government that is ‘intended only as an aid to the conversation - a starting point for discussion and debate’⁴ without the commitment to consult fully on an actual PfG that incorporates commitments to various social inclusion strategies is concerning to the WPG given the limited time remaining in this Assembly Term. We would welcome clarification from the Executive Office on this issue.

⁴ PfG Draft Outcomes Framework Consultation Document, (January 2021), p.7.

WRDA - Putting Women at the Heart of Public Consultations:

In the current political climate, there has been unprecedented numbers of public consultations, surveys to support private members bills and calls for evidence submissions to a range of committees in relation to various forms of legislation with extremely short deadlines to respond. The Women's Sector has faced funding challenges for many years, alongside additional challenges in working to support women throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

WRDA produced a guide for public authorities on 'Putting Women at the Heart of Public Consultations', and we would like to take this opportunity to share this resource again and some of the key recommendations. These guidelines are intended to provide advice for all those engaged in promoting women's participation in public consultations and surveys. WRDA is the secretariat of the Women's Policy Group and we would like to use this opportunity to share some extracts from their guidelines can be found below, as this will be relevant for future work of the NI Executive on engaging with various stakeholder groups:

"The case for proactively working to increase the participation of women in public decision making has been established by a number of international bodies that place obligations on the government and public authorities. For example, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women requires the State to take action to 'ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right to participate in the formulation of government policy'. (CEDAW, Art. 7) The UN's Commission on the Status of Women, the Council of Europe and the UN Security Council have all made similar recommendations.

Domestic commitments were made in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement which includes a provision to fulfil 'the right of women to full and equal political participation' and 'the advancement of women in public life'. Whilst the St Andrew's Agreement failed to mention women at all, the Stormont House and Fresh Start Agreements have both committed to addressing the participation of women in community development and 'the advancement of women in public life.'

However, even with these high-level policy commitments, on a day to day basis it can be hard to recognise why it is necessary to proactively make space for women's voices. If you don't work in the field of gender equality it can be easy to assume that the equality of opportunity that is now embedded into our society through anti-discrimination law means there should be no difference in how women and men experience the world. Gender neutral policy making is very common because we can forget that equality of opportunity is not the same thing as equality of outcome. As you read this guide it might help to keep the following reminders handy to return to if you find yourself questioning whether or not a person's gender would be relevant."

Why ask women?

- Women have only had access to public life for a tiny proportion of recent history and are still vastly underrepresented in all arenas of public power and decision making,
- Sexism is real and affects all women - experiences of sexism and traditional social expectations that women and girls grow up with can restrict ability to participate in public life,
- Caring responsibilities have a much greater impact on women's lives than on men's lives, particularly for childcare (an area that has disproportionately impacted women throughout the pandemic and many women are unable to participate in public life due to homeschooling commitments), but also caring for older, sick or disabled relatives. Further, 92% of single parents in Northern Ireland are women and women undertake the majority of unpaid caring work.
- The symptoms of gender inequality in our society affect different women differently. Some women bear the brunt of gender inequality due to other intersecting barriers connected to poverty, disability, race or sexual orientation. If we can understand the way to address gender inequality for the most marginalised women then this will benefit all women.

Above are just some of the domestic and international commitments to ensuring the participation of women in public life, and some of the additional barriers that women face in doing so. These factors, alongside the additional evidence outlined in this response, emphasise the need for meaningful engagement with women on issues as crucial as the Budget or the Programme for Government. Further comments from our guidelines include:

“Women’s participation is a priority for the women’s movement in Northern Ireland:

We’re not interested in simply having women’s perspectives included as an afterthought. We’re here to make sure women get the chance to change things. The inclusion of women in decision making should upset the status quo. It should put their stories and experiences at the centre of public policy and not on the edges.

We have produced this guide to demonstrate that women have the power to change the way society works and how services are shaped. It happens when they are supported to step into the process with the confidence to tell their stories and demand action from those who make decisions. In order to reimagine how women’s participation can make a real difference, we need to raise expectations on both sides of the conversation. What do we do about the fact that women’s organisations feel ‘over-consulted’, with the same people turning up to make the same demands but very little action taken? How can we improve the practice of statutory agencies whose community engagement activities can exclude many women because they fail to address the barriers women face? We hope that this guide can help us work towards improving participation practice with disadvantaged or marginalised women.

Public bodies have made significant improvements in consultation practice in recent years, both at Executive and Local Government level. However, this progress can always be reversed, such as the reduction in the time periods allocated to Executive consultations from 12 to 8 weeks as outlined under the Fresh Start

Agreement. There are also some persistent barriers to best practice, particularly when it comes to how women are able to access the consultation process.”

These tips are particularly important for ongoing engagement in relation to the final Budget or any Programme for Government that is agreed by the NI Executive.

Our key recommendations/tips for public bodies on including women in public consultations include:

1. Work together:

- Reach out to community-based women’s groups, seek their help and approach them as equal partners in the process. Listen to their suggestions on how your consultation process could be improved as they are more aware of the barriers at a local level and can help you get the best out of the process in the long term, even if it means making some changes.
- Be honest about the limitations as you plan the process together. For example, one of the biggest barriers to effective and meaningful consultation is cost. It’s important to work out what you can achieve together with the resources available. There will also be limitations around how progressed the policy or strategy is and how much is likely to change in response to the feedback women share. Most ‘consultation fatigue’ in the women’s sector comes from the experience of being contacted too late in the process to have a meaningful impact on the outcomes and seeing very little change as a result.
- Consider working with already established groups – women’s confidence can be enhanced if the setting is familiar and the other participants are not strangers.

2. Make time for accessible face to face engagement:

- Design and plan engagement opportunities that are responsive to women’s needs and the practical and social barriers they face. It always helps to talk to women’s organisations to help identify the best way to do this. Different demographics of women will face different barriers and there will be a range of possible solutions that you can try.
- Childcare is always a key priority in addressing barriers to women’s participation. Increasing access for women with childcare responsibilities may include choosing a time for the engagement session during which children are at school or childcare support is available. Providing crèche facilities would be ideal – bear in mind that women’s centres make an excellent venue because most have childcare facilities on site and crèche places can be made available if booked in advance.
- Set the tone of the engagement in a way that deals with the legacy of women’s lack of access to formal decision-making processes. The atmosphere should be as informal and non-intimidating as possible. Facilitate conversation in a way that is non-judgmental and makes it safe for women to talk about their experiences without feeling dismissed. The use of women facilitators with experience in community facilitation can help with this. A familiar, community-based venue is most likely to feel like a safe, accessible space.
- Even if you plan a session with lots of thought put into how to be responsive to women’s needs, if they don’t know about it they won’t come. Review how your sessions are advertised and think about how accessible they appear to women from

disadvantaged communities. Is the style and content of the invitation or flyer overly formal? Have you approached network organisations with access to community-based women's groups to ask them to include the invitation in their own newsletters? Have you made any statement about how you will provide for children, even if it is just a line to say 'child-friendly' or 'childcare available on request'?

3. Keep your language accessible and relevant:

- It is difficult to avoid jargon entirely in policy documents as you try to work out the best approaches and solutions to difficult public policy issues, based on evidence and expert advice. While you may have to reflect this terminology in the product, it's vital that what is presented for consultation is easy for the public to understand. Being open to hearing a different way of articulating the issues can only increase the potential for your policy to have a positive impact in the community.
- There is nothing like a consultation workshop with a group of women who aren't used to participating in formal decision making to put the substance of your proposals to the test! If what you've written isn't backed up by details about what will actually be put in place and how this will be achieved, then you can expect them to pull you up on that. Whatever your policy is aiming to achieve, make it meaningful and relevant if you want to get women's views on how it might affect them.

4. Listen to the stories:

There is a barrier to participation in conventional consultation exercises that can often be overlooked and it is the intimidation some people feel when asked for their opinion on a topic that they don't feel well informed about.

- The most open approach when attending a storytelling session is to take a back seat and demonstrate that you are there to listen to whatever the women want to share. The opposite of this would be to attempt to direct the conversation and seek approval for plans or ideas that you are already hoping to pursue. Obviously the reality for any conversation has to be somewhere in the middle – you know what information is going to be the most useful to inform your work and the thinking of those decision makers further up the chain. It is OK to try to draw that out, as long as you remember not to knock people's confidence by appearing to dismiss something they've shared.
- Binary options (do you agree or disagree, support this proposal or not etc.) are key features of many consultation documents but in a storytelling session they are often useless. If a proposal sounds good on paper, of course it can be easy for any consultee to say they support it, but that only scratches the surface of what that person can contribute. Storytelling with women's groups can access the untapped expertise of a group of people who have seen many similar proposals come and go, understand what made them succeed or fail, felt the frustration of watching the good ideas lose funding or had to pick up the pieces at a community level when statutory agencies fail to deliver. Consultations that do not make space for listening to women's stories are missed opportunities to get the best results.

5. Make women visible in the product as well as the process:

- Do not be afraid to highlight the gendered nature of an issue being addressed by public policy. Gender neutral policy is ineffective - we do not make policy in a social vacuum and you should aim to promote equality, not just recreate the same patterns of inequality that existed before. At the very least policies and strategies should take the inequalities and differences between men and women into account and make them visible.
- Statutory duties that address equality issues mainly deal with consideration of any adverse impacts that a policy might produce. On this basis alone many policies get screened out of equality impact assessment processes and opportunities are therefore missed to use policy as a vehicle for creating a more equal society. Other statutory duties, such as the duty under the Human Rights Act to ensure that everyone has equal access to their rights, can provide a framework for introducing policy that takes a more proactive approach.
- Remember that you should be planning to follow up any consultation exercise with feedback on how the consultees' views had an impact and so you will need to prepare information to take back to women's groups on how women's experiences and gender inequality will be dealt with in the final product.

Women in Northern Ireland have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic; financially, socially and in terms of health. It is crucial that legislative processes on issues relating to women are accessible and open, as women's lived experience is crucial to creating more robust human rights protections.

The full guidelines can be read [here](#).

WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan:

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 full 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. This call on decision-makers to take a gender-sensitive approach includes the development of the final Budget and the Programme for Government.

Our full Feminist Recovery Plan is available [here](#).

The WPG would like to take this opportunity to highlight some of the key areas of concern whereby women are being disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, and how this is likely to worsen under the current draft budget. This evidence also highlights why the WPG firmly believes that an actual PfG, with gender equality included throughout, should be developed as soon as possible for Northern Ireland.

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 year⁵.

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

⁵ Office for National Statistics (2017), ‘Unpaid carers provide social care worth £57 billion’, (available online):

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/articles/unpaidcarersprovidesocialcareworth57billion/2017-07-10#:~:text=Social%20care%20and%20the%20money,and%20a%20higher%20life%20expectancy.>

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.

The recommendations made in the Feminist Recovery Plan are crucial to deciding any Budget or Programme for Government for Northern Ireland. The vast amount of evidence in the Feminist Recovery Plan is from data available up to July 2020, and in many instances, the evidence of the disproportionate economic impact of COVID-19 on women have worsened drastically. A number of findings and recommendations will be highlighted below:

Feminist Recovery Plan - COVID-19 and Gender - Overview

We recognise that some issues highlighted will be of a devolved nature for the Northern Ireland Assembly, others will be issues that require Westminster intervention. This recovery plan will be based on all of the issues impacting women and specific policy recommendations will be made to both the Northern Ireland Assembly on devolved matters and to the UK Government on UK-wide issues.

It is essential that all levels of government representing Northern Ireland are fully aware of the unique challenges in Northern Ireland; particularly in the development of the final Budget and through identifying priorities for the Programme for Government. Women in Northern Ireland have suffered immensely due to a decade of Austerity, and any COVID-19 recovery cannot come to the detriment of women's equality and economic wellbeing.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented challenge across Northern Ireland. 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. The WPG is calling on decision-makers to take action to ensure a gender-sensitive crisis response as we transition from crisis response to recovery.

The current crisis affects men and women differently, and in many cases deepens the inequalities women experience on an everyday basis⁶. 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 2019⁷. 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.

Not only does this crisis have a disproportionate impact on women, but that impact is worsened for women from particular backgrounds: for instance, black and minority ethnic women, disabled women, women with caring responsibilities, and LGBT women. The emergency action required, and any recovery programme put in place, must meaningfully take into consideration the

⁶ See Women's Resource and Development Agency Reports on Gender Inequality in NI in 2020 <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Gender-Inequality-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf>; Brexit and the Impact on Women in NI <https://wrda.net/2019/10/18/brexit-and-the-impact-on-women-in-northern-ireland/>; Disabled Women and Discrimination <https://wrda.net/2019/11/18/disabled-women-and-discrimination-facts-we-need-you-to-know/>; Childcare: A Women's Issue <https://www.childcareforallni.com/post/childcare-a-women-s-issue-by-rachel-powell-women-s-sector-lobbyist-at-wrda>.

⁷ Women's Policy Group NI Election Manifesto 2019: <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Women%27sManifesto2019.pdf>

institutionalised inequalities that exist within Northern Ireland, and must co-develop a roadmap forward with the communities affected.

Relevant WPG Research and Publications

The WPG and member organisations have already published several briefings, articles, evidence submissions and reports on the unequal impact COVID-19 is having on Women in Northern Ireland. This has included:

- WPG [briefing](#) for MLAs on COVID-19 and Gender
- WPG [Article](#) on the impact of COVID-19 on Women
- WPG and WBG Joint [Statement](#) to DfC on Statutory Maternity Pay, Carer's Allowance and the Two-Child Cap
- WPG [Submission](#) to the Westminster Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry on the Impact of COVID-19 on People with Protected Characteristics
- WPG Domestic Violence and Family Proceedings Bill Evidence [Submission](#) and WRDA Domestic Violence and COVID-19 [Briefing](#)
- WPG [Article](#) on COVID-19 and Gender - NICVA Insights and Impact Series
- WPG [Article](#) on Human Rights Impact of COVID-19 on Women in Just News
- Childcare for All campaign [statement](#) on COVID-19 and Childcare

In addition to COVID-19 research, the WPG and member organisations have also published several submissions on gender-equality related issues that relate to the Programme for Government in the past two years including:

- WPG [Response](#) to the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights Consultation
- WPG [Response](#) to DAERA Discussion Document on a Climate Change Bill
- WPG [Response](#) to PMB Consultation on Period Poverty
- WPG [Response](#) to PMB Consultation on Paid Domestic Abuse Leave
- WPG [Response](#) to DOJ Consent to harm for sexual gratification: Not a Defence
- WPG [Response](#) to PMB Zero Hours Contracts Consultation
- WPG [Endorsement](#) of Transgender NI Response to HSCB Draft Objectives for Gender Identity Services in Northern Ireland
- WPG [Endorsement](#) of responses to the Adult Restorative Justice Consultation by CAJ and Raise Your Voice
- WPG Hate Crime Legislation Northern Ireland Independent Review Consultation [Response](#)
- WPG UK Government Marriage Equality Consultations [Response](#)
- WRDA [Response](#) to Department of Finance Budget Engagement 2020
- WPG [Response](#) to A New Legal Framework for Abortion Services in NI Consultation
- Women's Regional Consortium [Report](#) - Making Ends Meet - Women's Perspectives on Access to Lending

- Women's Regional Consortium [Report](#) - Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives
- Women's Regional Consortium [Report](#) - In Work Poverty
- Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network - Rural Voices Research [Report](#)
- WRDA [Response](#) to Consultation on Dormant Bank Accounts in Northern Ireland
- WRDA [Report](#) - Gender Inequality in Northern Ireland: Where are we in 2020?
- Equality Coalition [Report](#) - Sectarianism: The Key Facts
- Women's Regional Consortium [Report](#): Brexit and the Impact on Women in Northern Ireland
- WRDA [Report](#) - Disabled Women and Discrimination
- Human Rights Consortium - Brexit: Rights at Risk [Report](#)
- Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trade Unions: [Childcare in Northern Ireland: Care, Cost and Gender Equality](#)
- Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trade Unions: [Better Work Better Lives policy document](#)
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions: [No Going Back, a New Deal for a Safe and Secure Future for All](#)
- TUC [Report](#) - Forced Out: The Cost of Getting Childcare Wrong
- Women's Sector Lobbyist Childcare for All [Blog](#) - Childcare: A Women's Issue
- Northern Ireland Women's European Platform - [Northern Ireland civil society shadow report to CEDAW](#)
- Amnesty International [Report](#) - Toxic Twitter
- Amnesty International with Women's Link Worldwide, International Planned Parenthood Federation: A [Guide](#) for Europe: Protecting the Rights of Women and Girls in times of COVID19 pandemic and its aftermath.

Feminist Recovery Plan - Economic Pillar

The spread and aftermath of COVID-19 have vast implications for women's equality globally. Evidence is emerging from across the world of COVID-19 deepening pre-existing inequalities through exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are amplifying the impacts of the pandemic⁸. The economic shock from COVID-19 is unprecedented in modern times, both in its magnitude and its nature⁹.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused mass disruption to markets and supply chains with businesses being required to close or scale back operations and millions have lost their jobs and livelihoods¹⁰. The International Labour Organisation has estimated that lockdown measures have affected 2.7 billion workers, which equates to approximately 81% of the world's workforce¹¹. In the second quarter of 2020 alone, it is predicted that there will be massive losses in working hours, equivalent to 305 million full-time jobs, while 38% of the global workforce (1.25 billion workers) are employed in high-risk sectors¹².

The ILO also highlights that women have been the hardest hit, as they 'are disproportionately represented in high-risk sectors and are often amongst the first to lose employment and the last to return'¹³.

To address the economic impact of the pandemic globally, the IMF suggested¹⁴:

'Effective policies are essential to forestall the possibility of worse outcomes, and the necessary measures to reduce contagion and protect lives are an important investment in long-term human and economic health. Because the economic fallout is acute in specific sectors, policymakers will need to implement substantial targeted fiscal, monetary, and financial market measures to support affected households and businesses domestically. And internationally, strong multilateral cooperation is essential to overcome the effects of the pandemic, including to help financially constrained countries facing twin health and

⁸ United Nations, (April 2020), 'Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women', *UN Women*, (available online): <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406> [accessed 30.04.20], p.2.

⁹ IMF (April 2020), 'World Economic Outlook, April 2020: The Great Lockdown', (available online): <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020#Introduction> [accessed 10.06.20].

¹⁰ Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: Responding To The Socio-Economic Impacts Of Covid-19 (March 2020) https://www.un.org/Sites/Un2.Un.Org/Files/Sg_Report_Socio-Economic_Impact_Of_Covid19.Pdf

¹¹ Ibid, (n3), p.4.

¹² ILO (June 2020), 'COVID-19 causes unprecedented jobs crisis, almost all workers and businesses affected by lockdown measures', *ILO COVID-19 Protecting Workers in the Workplace*, (available online): https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_748441/lang--en/index.htm [accessed 20.06.20].

¹³ Ibid, (n7).

¹⁴ Ibid, (n4).

*funding shocks, and for channeling aid to countries with weak health care systems*¹⁵.

As the world is struggling with the health and economic impacts of COVID-19, this is compounded by the aftermath of the financial crisis where interest rates have remained at historical lows and public debts, on average, are higher than they have been over the past 60 years¹⁶. With historically low interest rates, governmental monetary policy options appear to be more limited now than ever before, as 'low rates, and the associated limits on monetary easing through conventional interest rate cuts, may be a fact of life for the foreseeable future'¹⁷.

As highlighted by the IMF and shown in the figure below, interest rates in advanced economies have been in a downward spiral for many years, a trend that accelerated after the global financial crisis. Central banks have decreased interest rates further in response to the pandemic, including the Bank of England, where the Base Rate was cut to an unprecedented 0.25% followed by a further cut to 0.1%, in an attempt to mitigate against the sharp economic shock by enabling cheaper borrowing for businesses and households.

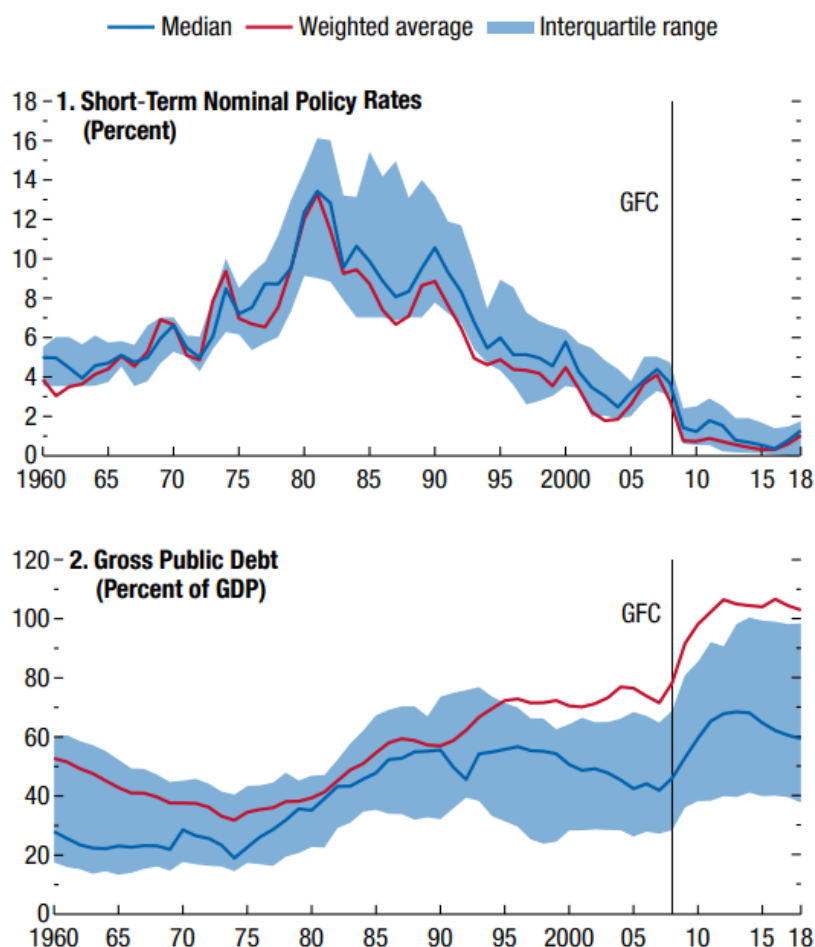
¹⁵ Ibid, (n4).

¹⁶ Ibid, (n4), Chapter 2: Countering Future Recessions in Advanced Economies: Cyclical Policies in an Era of Low Rates and High Debt, p.27.

¹⁷ Ibid, (n4), Chapter 2: Monetary Policy Options When Interest Rates Are Low, p.30.

Figure 1: Policy Rates and Public Debt in Advanced Economies

Reflecting long-term trends and the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the average advanced economy policy rate is near its lowest level since 1960 while average public debt to GDP is near its historical highs.



Sources: Bank for International Settlements; Haver Analytics; IMF Historical Public Debt Database; IMF, *International Financial Statistics*; Mauro and others (2015); national sources; and IMF staff calculations.

Note: The sample includes 35 advanced economies. For panel 1, when a country joins the euro area, it drops out. The euro area policy rate (set by the European Central Bank) enters in 1999, replacing the policy rates for euro area member states as they join. The weighted average uses nominal US dollar GDP weights. Time coverage across countries is unbalanced. GFC = global financial crisis (2008).

Source: International Monetary Fund Global Outlook April 2020, p.28.

Against this economic backdrop of low interest rates and high public debt, this Feminist Recovery Plan will make recommendations for policy-makers at a UK and devolved Northern Ireland level

to mitigate against the upcoming recession in a manner that will avoid exacerbating gender inequality in Northern Ireland.

Monetary Policy options may seem limited in this climate however, we will be advocating for monetary decision-making with a gendered lens that will support long-term economic reform. In addition, although there is limited scope for conventional monetary measures of cutting rates and introducing rounds of quantitative easing, further monetary accommodation in the short term is possible using unconventional tools¹⁸.

In sticking to the status quo, women will remain bearing the brunt of economic shocks and face greater barriers to economic participation. Relying on monetary policy alone is a risky strategy and despite an era of historically low interest rates, the UK government still has an immense capacity to enact several rules-based fiscal policies and further government borrowing to provide government support. The WPG would recommend that the NI Executive lobbies the Westminster government to consider these approaches to support to mitigate against the economic impact of the pandemic.

It is evident that the global economy is still facing an unprecedented challenge and with that, significant inter-governmental economic planning and creative policy-making is needed to recover.

We would like to highlight the comments made by UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, in June 2020:

‘The world of work cannot and should not look the same after this crisis. It is time for a coordinated global, regional and national effort to create decent work for all as the foundation of a green, inclusive and resilient recovery’¹⁹.

The WPG agrees with this statement, but would add that it is crucial that this is also done through a gendered lens, as the ILO, UN and many international bodies and countries across the world have recognised that the socio-economic impact of the pandemic is falling disproportionately to those who were already in precarious circumstances and who can least absorb the additional blow²⁰. We know that women overwhelmingly make up those in precarious circumstances across the world. As highlighted by UNICEF:

‘Given the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on gendered and multidimensional poverty, social protection responses that do not address the fundamental drivers of gender inequality, including unpaid care and responsibilities, will entrench already existing gender inequalities. As COVID-19 amplifies these inequalities,

¹⁸ Ibid, (n4), p.28.

¹⁹ Ibid, (n7).

²⁰ Ibid, (n7).

*now is a critical window of opportunity to build more effective social protection to endure through future pandemics*²¹.

The global picture described above can be seen playing out in Northern Ireland over the past year, as we are not exempt from the economic, social and political implications of this pandemic. It has become clear that the Northern Ireland Economy has suffered immensely due to COVID-19, and the impacts of this are likely to be wide-reaching and long-term.

Women were in extremely vulnerable and precarious economic positions before the pandemic, and this has now worsened. It is absolutely crucial both for women's wellbeing, and long-term economic recovery, that policy decisions to follow the pandemic do not further harm women's economic standing. Any government revenue raising should not come through austerity measures.

Women faced grave economic suffering following more than a decade of harsh austerity,²² as welfare reform policies introduced in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash had an adverse disproportionate impact on women. Existing research on the ongoing impact of austerity on women in Northern Ireland indicates that women are more likely to be greater impacted by austerity measures than men due to a range of societal factors that make women 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. Regardless of the reason for this inequality the effect is the same – the cumulative effect of these reforms is felt by women and by the most vulnerable women – those on low incomes*²³.

The economic pillar of the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan looks at a wide range of economic factors, provide evidence of existing, and deepen, inequalities for women, and make policy recommendations for the government to follow. Women in Northern Ireland have suffered enough due to what has been described as cruel and misogynistic economic choices in recent years,²⁴ and any recovery cannot be to their detriment.

²¹ Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed and Ramya Subrahmanian, (April 2020), 'Caring in the time of COVID-19: Gender, unpaid care work and social protection', *UNICEF*, (available online): <https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/caring-in-the-time-of-covid-19-gender-unpaid-care-work-and-social-protection/> [accessed 15.06.20].

²² See Siobhán Harding, (March 2019), 'Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives', *Women's Regional Consortium*, (available online): <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Impact%20of%20Ongoing%20Austerity%20Women%27s%20Perspectives.pdf> [accessed 02.06.20].

²³ Ibid, (n5), p.6.

²⁴ Philip Alston (November 2018), 'UK's welfare system is cruel and misogynistic, says UN expert after damning report on poverty', *The Telegraph*, (available online): <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/11/16/welfare-system-cruel-misogynistic-un-expert-warns-damning-report/> [accessed 15.06.20].

The full Feminist Recovery Plan gives extensive evidence and policy recommendations relating to:

- Women's Employment and Gender Pay Gap Reporting
- Gender Segregated Labour Markets and Care Work
- Women's Poverty and Austerity
- Increasing Debt
- Childcare
- Rural Women
- De-commodification of Housing
- A Feminist Green Economy
- Paramilitarism, Gate Keeping and Control of Funding

The detailed analysis included in these sections will be referenced in the summary reports of the Feminist Recovery Plan being sent to each Department. However, the WPG would like to highlight some of the findings relating to women's employment, care work, poverty and austerity, childcare and rural women as they are particularly connected to the draft Budget and should be priorities for the Programme for Government.

Women's Employment:

Women in Northern Ireland continue to be more likely to be in insecure and part-time employment, and whilst the overall gender pay gap is the lowest in the UK, women still earn on average around 9.6% less than men²⁵. Having dependent children significantly amplifies this difference and women responsible for dependent children are more likely to be in insecure, part time work.

Occupational segregation is still pervasive with men continuing to dominate in construction and manufacturing and women in public administration, education and health.

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.

Insecure and Low Paid Work - The Gender Dimension:

Northern Ireland undoubtedly has a problem with low pay. The Nevin Economic Research Institute estimated that in 2018, 28% of workers in Northern Ireland earned below the Real Living Wage with 10% earning below the National Living Wage. They further identify workers from accommodation and food sectors being particularly at risk of low pay²⁶.

The COVID-19 virus has caused governments to shut down large sections of the economy in order to contain infection whilst also being clear that there are essential services necessary to have a functioning society. In these sectors, workers have been expected to report to work as normal in order to maintain life, health and recovery, food and energy supply as well as vital public services. What the crisis has shown, is that there are thousands of workers who are essential to our economy.

Our society cannot survive without the labour that these workers provide, this is surely the definition of an 'essential worker'. Given this definition, one would expect that a society which recognises the indispensability of these workers would seek to ensure that we have an economy which rewards these workers commensurate with the value that we place on their labour. This is not the case.

²⁵ See: <https://www.pwc.co.uk/who-we-are/regional-sites/northern-ireland/press-releases/northern-ireland-rises-two-places-in-uk-female-economic-empowerment.html>

²⁶ See NERI research:
https://www.nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/2019/neri_research_inbrief_low_pay_in_ni.pdf

Instead, we have an economy where essential workers are among the lowest paid people in employment. In many instances, some of these workers also face the most precarious forms of employment so that the inadequate reward they receive for their labour is also highly uncertain.

In many cases, these low paid but essential workers are women and this is the driving force behind the persistent gender inequalities in our labour market. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has identified workers in food manufacturing, residential care and workplace cleaning as being especially vulnerable to low pay²⁷ with women in those sectors particularly vulnerable. 62% of women working in food manufacturing earn below the Real Living Wage²⁸, 55% of women in residential care earn below the RLW, whilst it is estimated that around 60% of women working as office cleaners earn below the RLW.

In other words, workers who we deem to be essential are not paid a wage that is sufficient to support a basic standard of living.

The Motherhood Penalty:

A NIC ICTU policy document Childcare in Northern Ireland: Care, Cost and Gender Equality²⁹ found that women with dependent children are over-represented in part-time employment, compared with men with or without dependent children and women with no dependent children. They are also more likely to be in temporary employment and much less likely to be self-employed than men with dependent children.

Men with no children are more likely than women to be in a full-time permanent job and having children greatly amplifies the difference in likelihood of being in a permanent, full-time job. 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.

The decrease in the proportion of women with children to not be employed in permanent, full-time employment appears to be driven almost entirely by the much higher likelihood of women with children to work part-time. 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.

Having dependent children reduces average weekly working hours of both men and women. There is, however, a much greater reduction in average working hours for women than there is for men. Women with dependent children work 5 hours less per week on average compared to women with no dependent children, whilst men with dependent children work 1 hour less on average

²⁷ See: https://www.ictu.ie/download/pdf/no_going_back_final_document_may_2020.pdf

²⁸ See: https://www.nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/2019/neri_research_inbrief_low_pay_in_ni.pdf

²⁹ Ibid, (n27).

compared with men with no dependent children. Women with no dependent children work around 8 fewer hours per week, on average, compared to men with no dependent children. Women with dependent children work an average of 11 hours less per week than men with dependent children.

This is an increasing issue in Northern Ireland, and many women struggle to manage the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities, low-paid work, insecure work and home-schooling almost one year on from the pandemic hit. The impact of COVID-19 on women's employment should be a priority for the NI Executive.

Gender Segregated Labour Markets and Care Work:

Substantive gender segregation remains in the labour market with men continuing to dominate in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as manufacturing and construction, and women continuing to dominate in public administration, education and health. The same is true in terms of occupational segregation – both men and women continue to dominate in occupations that have traditionally been associated with them.

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.

According to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, lone parents, 91% of whom are women, also experience occupational segregation in employment, with lone parents with dependent children mostly employed in 'Personal Service' and 'Elementary' occupations.

Care-giving has been identified as one factor influencing occupational segregation with women and lone parents choosing occupations allowing sufficient flexibility to balance the demands of care-giving. This may have a potential impact on the sustainability of employment, with women and lone parents having to consider pay and career progression with flexibility in employment³⁰.

UK-wide and Global Data on Gender Segregation:

Gender-segregated labour markets are a reality across the world, and Northern Ireland is no exception to this. In the context of the ongoing global health crisis, increased attention has been drawn to the fact that women constitute over 70% of health and social care staff (79% in Northern Ireland), with a significant proportion from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. For many this involves a double burden, as women also shoulder the lion's share of unpaid care work. UNICEF defines care work as:

³⁰ ECNI, 'Delivering Equality Employment - Key Inequalities', (available online): <https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/Employment-KeyInequalities-SummaryStatement.pdf> [accessed 29.06.20].

‘Supporting daily activities of individuals (such as cooking, cleaning, and providing daily essentials), as well as the health and wellbeing of others, including children and elderly’³¹.

Before the pandemic, globally women and girls carried out on average **three times** the amount of unpaid care and domestic work compared to men and boys³². During the lockdown, these responsibilities have increased significantly as women have faced increased responsibilities in relation to homeschooling, providing basic health care, childcare, shopping for vulnerable family members, ensuring dependents are abiding by new health and hygiene requirements and more.

This puts women at increased risk of infection, as well as spreading infection to vulnerable family members. In addition to this, people over the age of 60 have the highest risk of infection, but they are also often the source of childcare to support many families and enable younger women to access work, education and training. As highlighted by UNICEF, the intergenerational impacts of the virus on long-term care arrangements, whereby children need to be separated from older family members, needs to be better understood³³.

Further evidence from UNICEF highlights:

*Emerging data indicates that among confirmed cases of COVID-19 **men are consistently dying in higher numbers than women**. But when it comes to the economic and social fallout of the pandemic, women and girls face much greater risks³⁴.*

A UN policy-brief on the impact of COVID-19 on women also states:

Women will be the hardest hit by this pandemic, but they will also be the backbone of recovery in communities. Every policy response that recognises this will be the more impactful for it³⁵.

³¹ Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed and Ramya Subrahmanian, (April 2020), ‘Caring in the time of COVID-19: Gender, unpaid care work and social protection’, *UNICEF*, (available online): <https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/caring-in-the-time-of-covid-19-gender-unpaid-care-work-and-social-protection/> [accessed 15.06.20].

³² UN Women (2019), ‘Families in a Changing World’, *Progress of the World’s Women 2019-2020*, (available online): <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2019/progress-of-the-worlds-women-2019-2020-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3512> [accessed 20.06.20], p.15.

³³ Ibid, (n31)

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ United Nations, (April 2020), ‘Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women’, *UN Women*, (available online): <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406> [accessed 30.04.20].

Significantly, findings from the World Economic Forum (WEF) Gender Gap Report 2020 also highlight the strong correlation between a country's gender gap and its economic performance³⁶. 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'.

Across Northern Ireland, there is mass gender segregation across sectors. In particular, women are under-represented in high-paying jobs, STEM related work, and high-level decision-making roles.

According to the World Economic Forum, gender segregated labour markets now only lowers innovation levels in professions which lack gender diversity, but also that this professional gender divergence has a compounding effect on gender pay gaps. As the UK moves towards the "Fourth Industrial Revolution", the ramifications of this are set to worsen if urgent action in tackling gender segregated labour markets is not taken. Figure 14 below further highlights the gender gaps in the UK in 2020. Clearly, economic participation and opportunity and political empowerment are areas of concern, where urgent action is needed to reduce gender gaps and segregation.

NI Data on Gender Segregation and Caring Responsibilities:

When looking specifically at Northern Ireland, gender segregation and the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities is prevalent. 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. Women in NI also have a 70% chance of providing care in their adult life, compared to 60% for men and by the age of 46, half of all women have been a carer (11 years before men)³⁷. Research from Carers NI shows that Northern Ireland's carers save the economy £4.6 billion per year³⁸; whilst unpaid carers across all the UK provide social care worth £57 billion per year³⁹.

³⁶ World Economic Forum (2020) 'Mind the 100 Year Gap', *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*, (available online): http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf

³⁷ WRDA (February 2020), 'Gender Inequality in Northern Ireland: Where are we in 2020?', *Bold Women Blogging*, (available online): <https://wrda.net/2020/02/07/gender-inequality-in-northern-ireland-where-are-we-in-2020/#:~:text=In%202020%2C%20Northern%20Ireland%20has,decision%20making%20across%20Northern%20Ireland.>

³⁸ Carers NI (2015), 'NI Carers save government £4.6 billion a year', (available online): <https://www.carersuk.org/northernireland/news-ni/valuing-carers-15>; see also: Carers NI (2017) 'State of Caring 2017', (available online): <http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/pdf/state-of-caring-ni-version-2.pdf>.

³⁹ Office for National Statistics (2017), 'Unpaid carers provide social care worth £57 billion', (available online): <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/articles/unpaidcarersprovidesocialcareworth57billion/2017-07-10> [accessed 22.06.20].

What women have always known, and what has now been more unavoidable as the world tries to cope with the pandemic, 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.

Research on the rise of unpaid carers in the UK during COVID-19 highlights that the pandemic has led to an increase of 4.5 million people providing unpaid care; which is an almost 50% increase in the number of unpaid carers since the crisis began⁴⁰. Many new unpaid carers are drawn from the working population, as 26% of all workers are now juggling work and unpaid care; an increase from one in six to one in four⁴¹. Significantly, this highlights where future carers may come from if there is not sufficient investment in carer and support and significant investment into the redistribution of care work, and supporting unpaid carers, is needed urgently. The losses of a failure to invest in care will not only be felt by carers and their families, but to the employers and Northern Ireland economy alike.

This research also found that in Northern Ireland⁴²:

- 15% of respondents said they were already providing care before the COVID-19 outbreak (212,000 people) and a further 7% stated that they have started caring since the outbreak (98,000 people). Using population projections, it can be estimated that there are as many as 312,000 unpaid carers,
- 59% of respondents stated that unpaid caring responsibilities was having a detrimental impact on their ability to do paid work,
- 54% identified the financial impact of additional care costs as a key concern,
- 49% expressed high concern over not having anyone to talk to about the challenges of caring,
- 54% of respondents in NI stated that they are now more aware of the role of unpaid carers than before and 74% thought that carers were not well valued or valued at all,
- 72% of respondents in NI do not believe that unpaid carers have been supported by the Government during the COVID-19 pandemic,
- 74% of NI respondents also believed that the government should increase support; for example, though increased financial support, investment in care and support services so unpaid carers can take a break and through further investment in social services.

It is clear that both the UK government and the Northern Ireland Assembly need to urgently address unpaid caring responsibilities in any recovery planning and longer-term economic modelling. This includes the development of the final Budget and Programme for Government.

Given the disproportionate levels of unpaid caring responsibilities taken on by women, and the drastic impact this can have on women's participation in paid work and life time earnings, a

⁴⁰ 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*, (available online): https://www.carersuk.org/images/CarersWeek2020/CW_2020_Research_Report_WEB.pdf, p.4.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid*, pp.27-28.

gendered lens is needed in addressing the segregation of care work to prevent further embedding gender inequality.

In analysing gender segregation in paid work, women also disproportionately work in care, cleaning, catering, retail, hospitality and clerical jobs with poor protections, including sick leave, which makes them particularly vulnerable.

In Northern Ireland, 70% of workers that are ineligible for Statutory Sick Pay are women and 82% of part-time workers are women, in large part due to their additional caring responsibilities such as those mentioned above.

Given the essential, yet precarious, nature of caring work and other forms of frontline work, particularly in the private sector or for those caring for people in other people's homes, women are more likely to be unable to take time off work or stay at home to care for themselves and others due to the lack of SSP, not having employment contracts or feeling more pressure to stay at work.

The above trends are also evident in labour markets beyond those mentioned above as further evidence of gender segregation is present; with women underrepresented in higher-paying jobs in every sector in Northern Ireland.

The below statistics from the NI Assembly Research and Information Service shine a light on the vast gender segregation and disparities across the public sector in January of 2020⁴³:

- In Northern Ireland politics, women represent 37% of Lord Mayors, 26% of Local Councillors, 33% of MLAs and just 22% of MPs,
- In Public Appointments, women represent 28% of Chairs and 42% of all Public Appointments,
- Women represent 0% of Lord Chief Justice and Lord Justices of Appeal, just 25% of High Court Judges and 33% of County Court Judges,
- In the PSNI, zero women hold the position of Chief or Deputy Chief Constable and only 20% are Assistant Chief Constables. Women represent 30% of police officers and 58% of all PSNI staff,
- In the Civil Service, women represent 33% of Permanent Secretaries; 38% of Senior Civil Servants and 50% of the total NICS workforce,
- In the Education Sector, women represent 27% of University Chancellors or Pro/Deputy Vice Chancellors, 29% of FE College Principals and 60% of School Principals; despite 77% of all teachers being women,
- In the Health and Social Care Sector, women make up 79% of all staff but just 20% of Trust Chairs and 20% of Trust CEOs,
- In Local Government, women are 42% of all employees but just 27% of Council CEOs.

⁴³ NI Assembly Research and Information Service, (January 2020), 'Who Runs Northern Ireland? A Summary of Statistics Relating to Gender and Power in 2020', (available online): http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2017-2022/2020/assembly_exec_review/0120.pdf [accessed 22.06.20].

Gender segregated labour markets coupled with the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities is having a hugely detrimental impact on women's economic wellbeing in Northern Ireland. Addressing these issues need to be at the core of an Programme for Government and adequately funded through the final Budget for 2021-2022 and beyond.

Women's Poverty and Austerity:

Note: The following section relates to evidence up to July 2020 at the time of publication of the Feminist Recovery Plan. This evidence is still relevant now, and in many cases women's poverty and austerity has worsened dramatically since 2020. The WPG are deeply concerned about the impact of the draft Budget 2021-2022 on the ability to address some of these issues, particularly relating to the Department for Communities and its ability to implement welfare reform mitigations and funding for the independent advice sector. Our member organisation, the Women's Regional Consortium, is submitting a detailed response to the Department for Communities draft Budget 2021-2022 Equality Screening which will provide more information on the additional challenges that have arisen in this area. We welcome the EQIA by the Department for Communities and their recognition that the draft Budget for 2021-2022 will have a major impact on women.

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.⁴⁴ This is due to a range of societal factors that make women more vulnerable to these policies. 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. Regardless of the reason for this inequality the effect is the same – the cumulative effect of these reforms has been felt by women and by the most vulnerable women – those on the lowest incomes.

Research by the Women's Regional Consortium⁴⁵ details the struggles many local women have faced with austerity policies and illustrates that many women continue to feel the effects of austerity and welfare reform many years after these were introduced. A decade of austerity has meant many families already struggle to get by and the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic means that many of these families will face new challenges. Many people have lost their jobs, experienced cuts in their working hours and loss of earnings as a result of the pandemic. 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.⁴⁶ The research showed that in the highest income bracket, average earnings in February stood at £832 a week, and fell by £46 a week. In the lowest income bracket, they fell £43 a week, but from an average of £297. On average, single parents' earnings fell by more than double the amount experienced by households with children and more than one adult. Their average weekly

⁴⁴ Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes, Richard Cracknell, Richard Keen, Commons Briefing Papers SNO6758, December 2017

<http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SNO6758/SNO6758.pdf>

⁴⁵ Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives, Women's Regional Consortium, March 2019
<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Impact%20of%20Ongoing%20Austerity%20Women%27s%20Perspectives.pdf>

⁴⁶ COVID-19 Survey, Briefing Note, Wave 1: April 2020, Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, May 2020
<https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/2020/05/29/single-mothers-and-lowest-paid-covid>

household earnings fell £36, from £511 in February to £475 in April but single-parent households saw their average weekly earnings fall by £73, from £326 to £253 over the same period.

The result of this loss of income has meant that people have been forced to take action to mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic including reducing their spending, using savings, borrowing money, applying for Universal Credit and approaching charities including food banks for help. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children⁴⁷ has shown that parents who were caught in poverty pre-crisis are around 50% more likely to have lost their jobs than parents who were better off, 6 in 10 families are having to borrow, 7 in 10 families have had to cut back on essentials and over 5 in 10 families are falling behind on rent or other essential bills.

Demand for food banks in Northern Ireland has soared because of COVID-19. In April the number of emergency food parcels given out by the Trussell Trust locally rose 142% compared to the same time last year.⁴⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the number of Universal Credit claims due to the scale of job losses and the impacts on people's working lives of the lockdown. On 1 March, 70,000 people were claiming Universal Credit in Northern Ireland and by 26 April this number had risen by 80% to 126,000. The number of applications during this 8-week period totalled 65,700 with a ten-fold increase in new claims recorded at the height of the crisis in mid-March.⁴⁹ Latest available figures from the DfC show that there were 134,000 people claiming Universal Credit at 31 May 2020.⁵⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for the benefits system to act as a safety net for people in difficult times. It is likely that as the economy emerges from lockdown and faces a significant recession that many household finances will continue to struggle. Part of the solution must be to ensure that the benefits system provides sufficient support to the huge numbers of people impacted by this crisis both those facing a temporary income shock and also those facing longer-term financial hardship.

Before the pandemic women were already more vulnerable to poverty as they made up the majority of lone parents, those with precarious/low-paid jobs and those with caring responsibilities which limited their time for paid work. Job losses and the need to provide increasing levels of unpaid care as a result of the pandemic is likely to increase poverty and dependence on social security benefits especially for women. It is therefore imperative that as society emerges from the pandemic and the resulting recession, women must not pay the price for Covid-19 as they did for the previous financial crash.

⁴⁷ A lifeline for our children: Strengthening the social security system for families with children during this pandemic, Briefing by Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children, June 2020

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/file/55316/download?token=zdQGDbBp&filetype=briefing>

⁴⁸ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/health/coronavirus/coronavirus-crisis-sees-demand-for-food-banks-soar-in-northern-ireland-39257078.html>

⁴⁹ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-publishes-information-impact-covid-19-universal-credit-claims>

⁵⁰ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-uc-management-information-march-may-2020.xlsx>

The Women's Budget Group (WBG) has urged the Government not to turn to austerity measures to pay for the cost of the crisis. The WBG stressed that this will repeat the past and impact poor, BAME and disabled women the most. The WBG has suggested a range of alternative ways to pay for the measures needed including investment in social infrastructure to boost the economy, increased taxes on wealth and tackling tax evasion, avoidance and havens.⁵¹

Recommendations for changes in relation to social security benefits:

- Direct payments in lieu of school meals should continue throughout the summer months and until such times as 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:
 - The basic levels of Universal Credit should be increased in line with real living wages indefinitely to support those who have lost their jobs.
 - At the very least Government should hold on to the increase in the standard allowance even after lockdown has ended to help people get back on their feet.
 - 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.
 - 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, reducing the devastating impact of the five-week wait as suggested by the CliffEdge NI Coalition.⁵²
 - 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). This can leave women in receipt of Maternity Allowance up to £5,000 worse off over 39 weeks of maternity leave relative to women in similar circumstances in receipt of SMP.
- Scrap the two-child limit in Tax Credits and Universal Credit which would help to protect against an increase in child poverty.
 - In Northern Ireland consideration could be given to 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.

⁵¹ Easing Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women, Women's Budget Group, May 2020
<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Easing-lockdown-.pdf>

⁵² The CliffEdge NI Coalition is a group of over 100 organisations from across Northern Ireland who came together to express concerns about the end of welfare reform mitigations in March 2020. The Women's Policy Group is a Coalition member.

- We commend the Department for Communities for extending the existing mitigation payments for the Benefit Cap and Bedroom Tax in Northern Ireland. However, the pandemic makes it clear that a review of mitigation payments is needed to ensure a strengthened safety net to prevent and alleviate child poverty and homelessness.
- The Benefit Cap mitigation should be extended to new claimants as suggested by the CliffEdge NI Coalition. 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).
- Increase the level of Carer's Allowance and consider a one-off Coronavirus supplement of £20 a week to match the rise in Universal Credit as suggested by Carers UK.⁵³ This would benefit women who provide higher levels of care.

⁵³ 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*, (available online): https://www.carersuk.org/images/CarersWeek2020/CW_2020_Research_Report_WEB.pdf

Childcare

NOTE: Creating a childcare strategy and government-funded childcare provision currently falls within the remit of the Department of Education. To date, there has been no progress in the development of a Childcare Strategy. In addition to this, the Department of Education 2021-2022 Resource Budget Equality and Human Rights Screening references an Executive Childcare Strategy under NDNA Inescapable or Pre-committed Pressures to the value of £5 million. It is unclear when this strategy is going to be developed, and what progress will be made in relation to developing a childcare provision for 3-4 year olds, in line with NDNA commitments. Despite this, and the need for a much broader childcare provision beyond 3-4 year olds, the DE 2021-2022 Resource Equality and Human Rights Screening states that the impact of this Budget on equality of opportunity for women is minor. Further, under consideration of human rights issues, this screening states that the budget will have a neutral impact on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The WPG would disagree with this, particularly given the lack of progress relating to CEDAW recommendation on Relationship and Sex Education and a Childcare Strategy in Northern Ireland.

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

Like many other aspects of society, great inequalities existed that have now been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and childcare is no exception to this. Many women continue to face stark choices between their work and childcare commitments, as school closures and limited access to childcare settings created significant challenges for families.

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. Crucially, additional economic support is required for parents and carers who are isolating due to a family member showing symptoms or are looking after a child or relative with COVID-19, especially for single parents, the vast majority of whom in Northern Ireland (91%) are women.

We know anecdotally of families who have faced stark choices between losing employment or leaving young children at home alone, or presenting health risks to grandparents where no other care is available. The risks are increased for women who are key workers in low-income positions in care, cleaning and retail, or other essential positions such as teachers, as childcare for all key workers was not fully implemented and many parents were forced to risk being infected due to the nature of their work. Economically, we know that gender segregated markets in Northern Ireland sees women overrepresented in the hospitality and leisure sectors and subsequently, women face disproportionate ramifications of the health risks and economic crisis.

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. As Northern Ireland moved in and out of lockdowns throughout 2020, and now again in 2021, it is extremely concerning that the issue of access to childcare was completely absent from the NI Executive Roadmap to recovery and subsequent Executive updates; 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 this⁵⁴.

It is essential for governments to look ahead to the future sustainability of childcare and consider what policies are needed to create a strong, secure childcare infrastructure that supports the rebuilding of the economy. Research suggests that as many as 10,000 childcare settings may be unable to reopen after COVID-19, as roughly 75% blamed financial difficulties and 25% referenced fears of parents being able to afford or need the childcare they had previously employed⁵⁵. This is particularly concerning as many childcare providers and parents in Northern Ireland rightly raised their frustrations that as of 18th June 2020, only 5% of the £12 million financial support package for childcare has been allocated⁵⁶.

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 limited⁵⁷. As highlighted under the gender segregation and care work section of this pillar, many families rely on support from other family members for childcare to enable them to access the workforce.

⁵⁴ See Childcare for All Campaign Statements on Childcare and COVID-19: <https://www.childcareforallni.com/post/childcare-for-all-campaign-childcare-critical-to-families-and-economy> (June 2020); <https://www.childcareforallni.com/post/childcare-for-all-campaign-covid-19-statement> (May 2020).

⁵⁵ See: Richard Adams (April 2020), 'UK childcare industry 'crushed' by coronavirus crisis', *The Guardian*, (available online): <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/24/childcare-industry-crushed-by-coronavirus-crisis>; see also: Christine Berry, (May 2020), 'If we need childcare to reopen the UK economy, why is it so undervalued?', *The Guardian*, (available online): <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/23/childcare-reopen-economy-children-school-coronavirus>.

⁵⁶ Robbie Meredith, (June 2020), 'Coronavirus: Only 5% of £12m Stormont Childcare Scheme Spent', *BBC News*, (available online): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-53083774>

⁵⁷ Dr Lisa Wilson, (May 2020), 'Employment and access to childcare during the Covid-19 crisis', *Nevin Economic Research Institute*, (available online): <https://www.nerinstitute.net/research/employment-and-access-childcare-during-covid-19-crisis>, p.3.

NERI research indicates that families in NI use the following types of childcare⁵⁸:

- Family - 47%
- Nursery - 26%
- Out of School - 18%
- Childminder - 4%
- School - 4%
- Other - 1%

Clearly, greater understanding of the diverse needs of families, intergenerational relationships and childcare support within families is needed to ensure barriers to work, education and training are removed.

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 work⁵⁹.

Additional findings on parents and key workers' concerns include:

- In the next three months, 51% of parents of under-11s say they will struggle to make ends meet; this rises to 56% for single parents,
- 43% of households with young children have nearly run out of money compared to 18% of other respondents,
- Almost half (48%) of parents of young children say they are worried about how they will pay their rent or mortgage,
- 57% of parents of under-11s believe they will come out of COVID-19 with more debt than before,
- 61% of women respondents are key workers compared to 43% of men,
- 32% of women, compared to 15% of men, say their employer is pressuring them to continue to work outside the home,
- 57% of women working outside the home say that they cannot afford to stay at home; compared to 34% of men,
- 41% of women working outside the home say they have additional workload due to COVID-19, compared to 28% of men.

The economic impact of COVID-19 has been severe, and the lack of an adequate childcare provision in Northern Ireland will exacerbate many of the concerns highlighted above as we move

⁵⁸ Ibid, p.5.

⁵⁹ UKWBG et. al., (May 2020), 'Half of parents with young children struggling to make ends meet', *UK Women's Budget Group, Fawcett Society, QMUS and LSE*, (available online): <https://wbg.org.uk/media/half-of-parents-with-young-children-struggling-to-make-ends-meet/> [accessed 23.06.20].

further out of lockdown and more women have to work outside the home, or struggle with unemployment.

Creating a childcare strategy, in line with commitments made in NDNA, and an adequate government-funded childcare provision must be a priority throughout 2021-2022 in Northern Ireland budgeting and decision-making.

The childcare sector in Northern Ireland faces many challenges, with these challenges, the barriers for women accessing work, education and training will continue to rise.

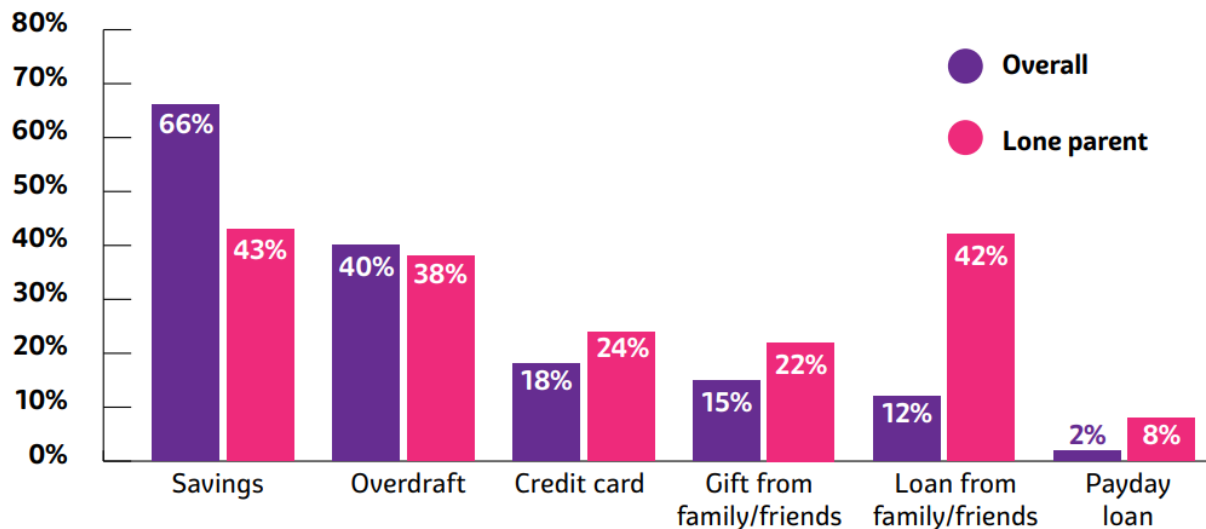
Research from the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey in 2019 also indicated the worrying increased cost trajectory of childcare in Northern Ireland. The most recent findings pre-COVID show⁶⁰:

- The cost of a week's holiday childcare for school children soared to £52 (56% increase) over the past 10 years, and now costs an average of £145 per week,
- 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,
- Families report spending an average of £137 per week on childcare. This rises to £178 where families use formal childcare only,
- 50% of families report spending more than 20% of their overall household income on childcare; this rises to 63% for lone parents,
- More than one in ten lone parent households reported spending more than 50% of their overall income on childcare,
- 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,
- Nearly half of respondents have had to cut back or go without another expense to pay their childcare bill; this rises to 63% for lone parents,
- More than 50% think there is a lack of sufficient childcare in their area and out of those, 45% say there is a lack of holiday scheme provision,
- Almost 50% of parents experienced a change in their working hours; one in five mothers decreased their hours of work or left work altogether compared to 6% of fathers,
- 45% of mothers attributed this to the cost of childcare,
- 73% of childcare providers reported an increase in their overall expenditure, compared to 29% who reported an increase in overall income,
- Pre-COVID, 32% of providers anticipated their economic positioning worsening over the next 12 months compared to only 17% who felt their position may improve,
- The majority of parents (87%) think the quality of childcare in Northern Ireland is good or very good.

⁶⁰ Employers for Childcare (2019), 'Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019', (available online): <https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2019/> [accessed 23.06.20].

The figures above are extremely concerning, especially given the drastically increased concerns of lone parents in Northern Ireland. The figure below from the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019 below shows the strain childcare costs having on lone parents (91% of which are women in NI):

Means used other than income to pay the childcare bill:



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

A recent TUC report on ‘Forced out: The cost of getting childcare wrong⁶¹’ provided some further evidence and recommendations on measures to prevent widespread and unnecessary job loss among working parents. In particular, this report raised the grave concerns of

‘not having enough childcare for working parents and how the risk of this 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’⁶².

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. Some relevant statistics on childcare, flexible working and gender pre-COVID in England and Wales that follow patterns in Northern Ireland include:

- 54,000 women per year are forced out of work due to pregnancy and maternity discrimination⁶³,

⁶¹ TUC (June 2020), ‘Forced out: The cost of getting childcare wrong’, *TUC*, (available online): <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/forced-out-cost-getting-childcare-wrong> [accessed on 23.06.20].

⁶² *Ibid*, (n51), p.2.

⁶³ ONS (2019) *Families and the Labour Market* found in (n51), p.5.

- Five years after a child's birth, only 13% of mums have increased earnings compared to 26% of dads⁶⁴,
- 56.2% of mothers had to make a change to their employment due to childcare, compared to 22.4% of fathers⁶⁵,
- 1/3 requests for flexible work were rejected by the employer⁶⁶,
- 87% of men in paid work were full-time workers compared to 59% of women⁶⁷,
- Children from low income backgrounds in England were the least likely to attend early years provision but stand to gain the most from it⁶⁸,
- Between 2008 and 2018, the cost of nursery fees rose three times faster than working parents' wages⁶⁹,
- Childcare costs for lone parents working time in that same time period rose seven times faster than earnings,

In particular, we would like to reference TUC concerns⁷⁰ that:

“as the job retention scheme winds down and employers begin to make decisions about job losses, 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. Our affiliated unions are also hearing from mums returning from maternity leave who are stuck without any childcare at all, as the limited places on offer are to children already in a setting prior to Covid-19.

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 [...] the government must also do their part to ensure employers are compliant with their obligations under existing legislation such as the Public Sector Equality Duty and strengthen the rights of pregnant women, those on maternity leave and with caring responsibilities to ensure their jobs and incomes are protected. Employers must be given clear messages from the government, highlighting existing guidance, that redundancy procedures and the criteria used must not unlawfully discriminate against workers with protected characteristics.”

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ 1 TUC (2019) Good work plan: Proposals to better support families found in (n51), p.6

⁶⁷ ONS (2019) Families and the Labour Market found in (n51), p.6.

⁶⁸ DfE (2019) Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents in England 2018 found in (n51), p.9.

⁶⁹ TUC (2018) Childcare fees have risen three times faster than wages since 2008 <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/childcare-fees-have-risen-three-times-faster-wages-2008-tuc-analysis-reveals> found in (N51) p.9.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, (n51), p.4.

It has also been reported that since the crisis began, mums are 1.5 times more likely than dads to have quit or lost their job or been furloughed (as of July 2020 - this has significantly worsened since)⁷¹. The above statistics from the TUC coupled with the Northern Ireland specific data from Employers for Childcare, ICTU and the Nevin Economic Research Institute paint a stark picture of the growing unsustainability and crisis of childcare across the UK. This is a UK wide issue that needs urgently addressed through devolved mechanisms in any COVID-19 recovery planning.

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.

There is little evidence that experience, skills or additional qualifications will reap much reward in the childcare sector with much smaller gaps between the lowest paid and the highest paid in the sector. Specifically, the median wage at the 10th percentile is £7.36, whilst the median wage at the 80th percentile is £10.24 per hour. Owing to sample size constraints it is not possible to get an estimate at the 90th or higher percentiles. A ratio of around 1.4:1. Comparing this to workers as a whole the median wage at the 10th percentile is £7.50, and £18.27 at the 80th percentile. A ratio of around 2.5:1.

If the goal of childcare policy is to make such a service more affordable and available, this cannot be at the expense of pay and conditions for workers in the sector. If childcare is to become an important and valued service, then the workers who provide that service also require to be valued. The current situation regarding pay and job quality shows that workers are underpaid and undervalued. 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.

Unionisation and collective bargaining or a system of sectoral agreements provide a mechanism to introduce a skills and wage infrastructure that could improve job quality. Previous research has shown the role that unions have historically played in introducing specificity in occupations and skills recognition. Furthermore, devolved bargaining structures such as works councils in Germany, which implement sectoral agreements at the ground level, have also been shown to give the greatest premium to low paid workers.

The evidence highlighted throughout this section on childcare is stark, and 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,

⁷¹ IFS (2020) 'How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?', (available online) <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14860> [accessed 23.06.20].

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.

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 the CEDAW recommendations, noting the particular reference to Northern Ireland where we call on the Government to introduce a fully costed Childcare Strategy, underpinned by legislation, that meets the needs of children, parents, childcare providers and benefits the 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 to provide a mechanism to introduce a skills and wage infrastructure that could improve job quality.
- Promoting family friendly policies and practices across all sectors to reduce barriers to women accessing and progressing in the workforce⁷².

⁷² Childcare has been identified as an issue across the world and different solutions implemented. For example in Italy, the Cura Italia economic package includes parental leave of up to 15 days paid at 50% of salary, for parents of children under 12 or children with disabilities of any age. The scheme is designed for employees in the private sector and self employed people, and the days are to be used between both parents (where relevant). Separate provision is being made for public sector workers. Parents can also request a set number of days’ paid leave in each month or babysitter vouchers worth up to €600. The package also includes a €5 million ring fenced element for female entrepreneurship in a fund for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). In Belgium, paid part time parental leave schemes have been introduced

Rural Women

Women in NI have not been afforded the opportunity to participate equally in progressing the country from a post conflict society to a peaceful society. This is having a negative impact on their social and economic development, particularly those already experiencing disadvantage, such as rural women. The onset of a global pandemic will undoubtedly exacerbate this existing inequality if Covid-19 recovery planning does not take active measures to acknowledge and redress this. It is imperative that our region has 'visible' women at decision-making level if a gender equal sustainable future is to be achieved.

Gender inequality is amplified for women in rural areas due to Access Poverty⁷³. 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 areas⁷⁴. Women in NI remain under-represented in public and political life⁷⁵ and rural women's participation in public and political life is further hindered by geography and distance from decision making spaces. Even recent welcome initiatives such as; 'Women in Public Life' Programme⁷⁶ is based in Belfast and this is echoed in the location of the majority of public appointments; even within the wider women's sector rural women still need a stronger voice⁷⁷ and support: *'There are also stark inequities between Government funding for service delivery to women's groups between rural and urban (1.3% v 98.7%)'*⁷⁸.

NIRWN as the only dedicated rural women's network; 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). The vision of this Programme is: *'That women living in disadvantage in both Urban and Rural will be provided with the specialist support they require to enable them to tackle disadvantage and fulfil their potential in overcoming the barriers that give rise to their marginalisation, experience of poverty and exclusion'*. An independent Evaluation of this Consortium work concluded⁷⁹ 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

⁷³ TRPSI Framework

<https://www.daerani.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/dard/Final%20Version%20-%20Consultation%20Document%20on%20Proposals%20for%20Successor%20Framework.pdf>

⁷⁴ Rural Women's Manifesto *Rural Women Speak* NIRWN June 2015.

⁷⁵ Women and Public Appointments in NI

http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/11914.pdf

⁷⁶ <http://politicsplus.com/programmes/women/women-in-public-life-programme/>

⁷⁷ Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015)

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015) 12 Rural Needs Act, 2016.

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 ¹² 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.

Feminist Recovery Plan - Health Pillar

The Women's Policy Group Feminist Recovery Plan Health Pillar highlights significant amounts of evidence on the physical and mental health impacts of COVID-19 on different groups of women in Northern Ireland.

In this pillar we provided a range of evidence relating to:

- Mental Health Concerns due to COVID-19 including (particularly victims of domestic and sexual violence and LGBT+ people),
- Additional health impact on women with caring responsibilities and dependents
- Additional health concerns relating to the backlog of cancer screenings and increased waiting lists,
- Health impacts of Austerity on women,
- Abortion, Maternal Mental Health and Bodily Autonomy,
- Health Inequalities and Hostile Environments for Migrants and BAME people,
- Trans Healthcare,
- Disabled Women

A Bespoke Summary of Recommendations relating to the Department of Health will be submitted to the Health Minister. However, we would like to take this opportunity to raise our evidence, concerns and recommendations relating to the additional health impact on women with caring responsibilities and the health impacts of austerity on women; given the limited ability of the draft budget on the ability to mitigate against these issues.

Women with Caring Responsibilities and 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 includes:

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%).

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. Earlier in this plan, statistics were given of the economic benefits of investing in care for both gender equality and in addressing climate change. The needs of carers' health should be a priority in any recovery planning in Northern Ireland.

Additional Health Impacts of Austerity on Women:

Women in Northern Ireland were disproportionately and cruelly impacted by years of austerity and welfare reform. Not only does austerity have significant impacts on economic standing, it also has been proven to have profound health impacts. Research by the British Medical Association highlights:

'Austerity and welfare reform in the UK has resulted in substantial reductions in public spending, principally through budgetary cuts on departments and services. This has significantly affected local government funding and welfare support. The broad impact has been to hamper progress in reducing inequality and job prospects; a decrease in the number of households achieving a minimum income for healthy living; increases in relative child poverty; and increased levels

of material deprivation. These factors can impact negatively on health and wellbeing in the absence of strong support systems.’⁸⁰

Evidence from countries such as Iceland, Sweden, Canada and Norway highlights the importance of maintaining high levels of public spending on social welfare and health as important mechanisms for improving health outcomes and narrowing health inequalities, while supporting long-term, sustainable economic growth.

In the context of an upcoming recession due to COVID-19, we support recommendations from the British Medical Association to:

- Increase investment in social protection systems - such as unemployment programmes, housing support and income maintenance - to counter the projected recession and austerity,
- Increase investment in healthcare and public health services in the short and long-term, including adequate funding for evidence based preventative and early intervention services.

Throughout this recovery plan, we have presented evidence of the horrific impact austerity has had on Northern Ireland. Suffering for women due to a decade of austerity was immense; socially, economically and in terms of health. In addressing the health crisis we currently face, tackling health inequalities for women and the unequal health ramifications of economic decision making needs to be a priority.

⁸⁰ BMA (2016), ‘Health in all policies: health, austerity and welfare reform: A briefing from the board of science’, *British Medical Association*, (available online): <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/2086/bos-health-in-all-policies-austerity-briefing-2016.pdf>

Feminist Recovery Plan - Social Justice Pillar

The Social Justice Pillar of the feminist recovery plan related to a range of issues concerning:

- Racial Justice,
- Politics, Public Life, Peacebuilding and Decision Making,
- Restorative Justice,
- Digital Divide and Access Poverty,
- No Recourse to Public Funds and Immigration.

All of these issues will be covered in the bespoke summary reports being sent to each Minister, however, we would like to take the opportunity to raise our evidence, concerns and recommendations relating to the impact of COVID-19 on BME communities working in Health and Social Care, recommendations relating to NDNA and the urgent need to tackle the Digital Divide and Access Poverty given their relevance to the limitations of the draft budget and draft PfG Outcomes Framework.

COVID-19 Impact on BME Communities and Health and Social Care Staff:

In the context of COVID-19, evidence suggests that the pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on BME 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 this⁸¹:

- Early analysis points to an 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, including hospital consultants, nurses, healthcare assistants and cleaners 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.

Research from the WBG, LSE, Queen Mary University of London and the Fawcett Society has also produced significant evidence on BME women and the impact of COVID-19⁸²:

⁸¹ NHS Confederation BME Leadership Network Member Briefing April 2020:

<https://www.nhsconfed.org/resources/2020/04/the-impact-of-covid19-on-bme-communities-and-staff>

⁸² WBG et. al. (2020), 'BAME women and COVID-19 - Research Evidence', (available online):

Poverty and Debt

- 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. 42.9% of women of colour also said they would struggle to make ends meet over the next three months. A quarter of BME mothers reported that they are struggling to feed their children (23.7%).

Work and Employment

- 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).

Domestic Care and Work

- 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.
- Around ¾ of all women reported doing the majority of housework and childcare during the lockdown.
- 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.

Access to Support

- 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%).
- People of colour were also more likely to have lost support from other people (48.3% compared to 34.0%) and were less likely to say there were people outside of their household who they could rely on for help (47.4% compared to 57.2%).
- Over half of women of colour said that they were not sure where to turn for help as a result of the pandemic compared to 18.7% of white respondents.

Recommendations:

- 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.
- Develop a Racial Equality Strategy and incorporate accountability mechanisms into the Programme for Government to address systemic racism.

- 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.
- As recommended elsewhere in this plan, immediately increase child benefit to £50 per child per week; scrap the two-child cap which can disproportionately impact BAME families across the UK; make UC advanced payments grants instead of loans.
- Scrap No Recourse to Public Funds.
- 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.
- Complete and publish meaningful and comprehensive equality impact assessments of all COVID-19 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.
- 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.

Politics, Public Life, Peacebuilding and Decision Making – New Decade, New Approach:

In the context of COVID-19 recovery planning, it is imperative that women are included in decision making across all departments in Northern Ireland. Already, we have seen recovery planning take place with little to no consultation with the women's sector, who have been consistently producing evidence of the disproportionate impact COVID-19 is having on women. The involvement of women in decision making is crucial when the final budget is agreed and in the implementation of a final Programme for Government.

Whilst there has been some progress on a number of social inclusion strategy, we have also seen significant delays to other commitments set out in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. COVID-19 is exacerbating existing inequalities, and women's equality cannot be deprioritised 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.

Commitments to introduce the below strategies, and include these strategies alongside appropriate funding within the final Programme for Government, cannot be delayed any further, as civil society and women more generally have been calling for the implementation of many of these strategies for more than a decade:

- Anti-poverty strategy,
- Economic/Industrial strategy,

- Investment Strategy,
- Energy Strategy,
- Racial Equality Strategy,
- Disability Strategy,
- Gender Equality Strategy,
- LGBTQI+ Strategy,
- Active Aging Strategy,
- Children and Young People's Strategy,
- Childcare Strategy,
- Strategy to address impacts of climate change.

Women's participation is key in the creation of all of the above strategies, which are set to be the basis of the Programme for Government. Our recommendations throughout this plan should too be considered, when identifying the impact of COVID-19 on all of the above groups. 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.

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'⁸³, which were developed in 2015 by a multi-disciplinary group of human rights experts and academics, could assist in achieving this.

Recommendations:

We call upon elected representatives to:

- 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.

⁸³ Catherine O'Rourke (2015), 'Gender Principles for Dealing with the Legacy of the Past', *Transitional Justice Institute*, (available online): https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/66285/Gender-Principle-Report-Sept-2015_Final-Version.pdf [accessed 29.06.20].

- Utilise Section 43A of the Sex Discrimination (NI) Order 1976 to improve the proportion of women elected to parliamentary institutions through gender quotas. Accelerate action to reach gender equal representation in public bodies.
- 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,
 - o Online abuse of women political and public representatives,
 - o 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,
 - o 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 wellbeing⁸⁴.

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,

⁸⁴ See the PPR campaign 'Internet Access for All': <https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/internet-access-for-all>

though is not exclusive to, the elderly and those with irregular immigration status. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the potential of technology in connecting people and also in providing support services.

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.

Feminist Recovery Plan - Cultural Pillar

The cultural pillar of the Feminist Recovery Plan contains significant amounts of evidence and recommendations relating to various parts of the NI Executive. These issues include:

- Women and Girls in the Media, Rape Culture and Violence Against Women,
- Violence Against Women,
- Hate Crimes and Online Abuse against Women,
- Education and Training:
 - Equality and Diversity Education,
 - Women's Access to Education and Training

Bespoke reports with highlight how these issues relate specifically to the Department of Justice and Department of Education will be sent to both respective Ministers. In particular, the WPG would like to raise our concerns relating to funding being provided to effectively implement the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill and additional forms of legislation that relate to violence against women. Significantly, this includes the need for funding to be provided to support the Domestic Abuse and Family proceeding Bill; Protection from Stalking Bill; Enhanced Legal Protections for Victims of Domestic Abuse (Domestic Abuse Protection Orders and Domestic Abuse Protection Notices) and other areas that are currently missing in NI including a specific strategy to address violence against women and girls.

In addition to this, funding needs to be urgently identified to implemented recommendations to address other forms of violence and to develop educational programmes and campaigns from both the Gillen Review and the Hate Crime Legislation Review. Statutory funding should also be made available to support the deliver of such recommendations and awareness raising programmes through specialist support groups working within the voluntary and community sector in order to support the needs of victims. Finally, the WPG would also like to raise our concerns with limited progress being made to adhere to CEDAW recommendation to urgently implement proper relationship and sex education (RSE) as well as support community adult education.

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

COVID-19 has led to huge disruptions to the lives of women, as schools closed and many women faced having to balance home-schooling, childcare, work from home and their own educational needs. The information on the unequal distribution of care and gender equality gaps that remain in the UK highlight the urgent need to prioritise women's access to education and training; particularly as many will have lost their jobs due to COVID-19 or may risk future job losses due to automation with any technological revolution. Intersectional policy-making is needed to address

issues such as the digital divide, issues for women from migrant backgrounds struggling with language barriers in supporting children with homeschooling, rural access poverty, limited support for parents with disabled children and more is needed.

Recommendations:

- Provide support to women impacted by welfare reform, past austerity and COVID-19 to enable them to be work ready through the provision of supported community-based education and training.
- Establish a fund to address the disproportionate cuts to the women's sector community adult education.
- Create targets for apprenticeships to ensure a gender balance.
- Urgently address digital poverty and the impact of educational needs of families across all of Northern Ireland, including access to free internet and technology.
- Abide by CEDAW recommendations to:
 - Strengthen efforts to encourage girls to pursue non-traditional subjects and take coordinated measures to encourage girls to take up courses in science, technology, engineering and mathematics,
 - Continue to implement the recommendations of the Women and Equalities Committee contained in the report of October 2018 on sexual harassment of women and girls in public places,
 - Take measures to introduce mandatory age-appropriate education on sexual and reproductive rights in school curricula, including issues such as gender relations and responsible sexual behaviour throughout the UK,
 - Ensure there are adequate educational campaigns related to any hate crime legislation review, domestic abuse legislation and all other legislative changes,
 - Promote human rights education in schools which includes a focus on the empowerment of girls and the Convention.

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 budget and throughout departmental spending, 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 equality⁸⁵.” 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.” 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.

⁸⁵ UK Women's Budget Group (2017), 'What is Gender Responsive Budgeting?', available online: <https://wbg.org.uk/resources/what-is-gender-budgeting/>

WPG Key Strategic Briefings and Webinar Events:

The WPG has produced a range of key briefings including:

- WPG Childcare Key Briefing – available [here](#).
- WPG Strategic Investment Board Key Briefing – available [here](#).

These briefings highlight some key concerns for the WPG relating to the need for childcare to be treated as an economic priority in Northern Ireland and key priorities for any future Strategic Investment Strategy. We hope to see these priorities reflected in the final budget and final programme for government.

In addition, in the absence of adequate time to consult with members or having meaningful engagement through public events with women in relation to the draft budget, subsequent departmental equality screenings/EQIAs or programme for government, we would like to highlight the various events that have been held with members, and upcoming events, on issues relating to:

- Women, Poverty, Austerity and the Impact on Women,
- COVID-19 and the Impact on Rural Women,
- A Global Outlook – Social Justice and Gender Equality Post-COVID-19,
- COVID-19 and Additional Health Impact for Marginalised Women,
- COVID-19 and Violence Against Women,
- Women's Rights, Brexit and the Bill of Rights – Challenges and Opportunities 20 Years on from UNSCR 1325
- Looking at Childcare, COVID-19 and Women – One Year On
- COVID-19 and Women's Workers' Rights,
- COVID-19 and the Climate Emergency as a Feminist Issue

Recording of all of these sessions, alongside summary briefings, can be found [here](#).

Rural Needs

In June 2017, the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 was introduced and placed a statutory duty on public authorities to have due regard for rural needs when developing, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services. The Act was introduced to ensure that the consideration of the needs of people in rural areas becomes more firmly embedded within public authorities.

Earlier in this response, we highlighted some of the key priorities for rural women in Northern Ireland and for the needs of rural women to be included in decision making, in line with the Rural Needs Act. This is of particular importance given issues relating to access poverty, the digital divide, insufficient funding to support rural women and the fact that rural women are under

increasing pressure from the economic climate leaving them experiencing more poverty and social inclusion than ever before. It is disappointing that neither the draft budget 2021-2022 or the DfC's EQIA have included a Rural needs Assessment. Further, the DEARA equality screening assessment of the impact on men and women generally only references the fact that 9% of farmers are women; which totally negates the multitude of issues rural women face that are highlighted throughout the Feminist Recovery Plan. Out of all women in Northern Ireland, 36% live in rural areas⁸⁶, and the Rural Needs Act requires an assessment of rural needs to be carried out at the early stages of policy development; including in the development of the draft budget.

Endorsement WPG Member Responses

This WPG response to the various consultations mentioned in the beginning of this document reiterates information previously published by the WPG that needs to be considered areas of priority for the NI Executive. However, several WPG member organisations are submitting detailed responses that we would like to endorse.

Women's Regional Consortium:

The Women's Regional Consortium response to the Draft Budget 2021-2022 and the DfC Draft Budget 2021-2022 contains much more detailed evidence on the drastic impact the current draft budget would have on women, poverty, austerity and social security. We would like to fully endorse this response and urge the NI Executive to take this evidence on board. In particular, we would like to endorse the comments made by the WRC relating to:

- Welcoming the lessons learned following the Equality Commission's findings that the Department of Finance "failed to comply" with its equality scheme in preparation of the 2019/20 budget,
- Concerns that the opportunity to respond to the 2021-2022 draft budget consultation, and subsequent equality screenings, has been extremely challenging given the short time frames to respond, particularly given the pressures on the women's sector to respond to a range of other consultations that are of significant importance to women in NI,
- Significant evidence on the impact of welfare reform and austerity on gender equality in Northern Ireland,
- Problems with gender-neutral approaches to policy making in Northern Ireland,
- Testimonies from women in Northern Ireland on the impact of austerity on poverty on them and their children, and how these voices need to be considered by the NI executive,
- Support for the Cliff Edge Coalition and their ongoing work on welfare reform mitigations,
- Impact of COVID-19 on women, equality and the social security system,

⁸⁶ Mid-Year Population Estimates – Urban/Rural Change, NISRA: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/mid-year-estimates-population-change>

- The crucial nature of the Independent Advice Sector and need for further funding to urgently support this sector,
- The need for further employment support, particularly given the economic impact of COVID-19 on unemployment,
- The need for importance of childcare to be recognised, and for childcare to be given a stronger focus within the draft budget for Northern Ireland in order to help with various issues including increased unemployment levels, “economic inactivity” of women and the economic downturn,
- Highlighting issues that the draft budget presents for Women’s Sector funding, particularly the Women’s Centres Childcare Fund, Community-based training and education and funding for Women’s Centres and the Women’s Regional Consortium,
- Concerns around the lack of gender disaggregated data which makes it difficult to fully assess and address objective need (for instance in relation to universal credit),
- The WRC responses to the consultation questions in the DfC EQIA.

NI Women’s Budget Group:

In addition, the NI Women’s Budget Group response to the draft Budget 2021-2022 provides a detailed overview of the implications of the draft budget on the economic and social wellbeing of women in Northern Ireland. This includes an overview of the impact of the budget on childcare, “economic inactivity” and unemployment experienced by women, social security, the gender pay gap and equality considerations. Further, the NIWBG response provides additional information on gender budgeting that we hope to see reflected in the final budget and final PfG. In particular, in answering the questions in the draft budget 2021-2022 consultation, the NIWBG raises a number of points that we would like to endorse. This includes:

- the need for a gender analysis to inform budgetary decisions,
- concerns about the timeframe of the consultation processes,
- recommendations to adopting a free, universal childcare provision as a means of raising revenue,
- investment into the care sector more generally to raise revenue,
- creating a women’s employment strategy,
- considering the fact that more women work in the public sector than in the private sector (52.1% versus 47.9%) compared to men (68.4% versus 31.6%) when discussing the balance between public sector pay against other priorities,
- Supporting recommendations bade by the Commission for a Gender Equal Economy on Creating a Caring Economy: Call to Action.

All of the above recommendations are embedded within the comprehensive Women’s Policy Group COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan and are key to responsible economic decision making in Northern Ireland.

Equality Coalition

As stated earlier in this response, many of the members of the WPG are also members of the Equality Coalition, and we would like to take this opportunity to endorse their response to the Draft Budget 2021-2022 Consultations, Departmental EQIAs and Equality Screenings, and Draft (PfG) Outcomes Framework. In particular, we would like to endorse:

- Calls for explanation from TEO as to why the draft budget was excluded from the Executive's agenda until its approval on 18th January 2021⁸⁷; which left just over five weeks for public consultation,
- Comments relating to the current PfG and Consultation,
- Budget and Equality duties,
- Comments on the Department Budget Allocation responses.

ENDS

For any questions or queries relating to this response, please contact Rachel Powell, Women's Sector Lobbyist, rachel.powell@wrda.net

⁸⁷ [Ministerial Statement Public Expenditure: Draft Budget 2021-22, NI Assembly](#), 18th January 2021