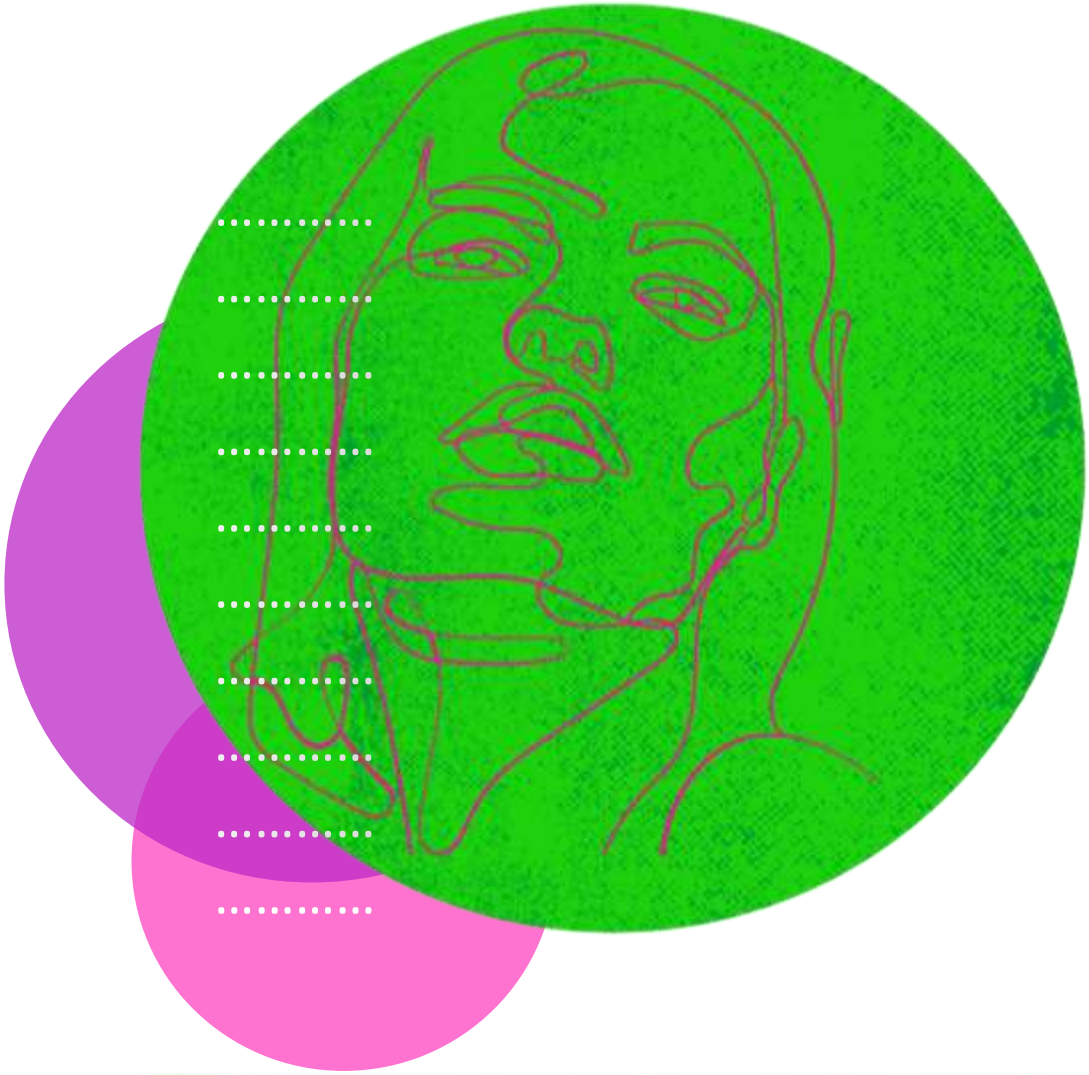

Women's Policy Group NI

COVID-19 FEMINIST RECOVERY PLAN

UK Government
(Summary Report)

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Introduction

The WPG Feminist Recovery Plan was written by the Northern Ireland Women's Policy Group (WPG) and published in July 2020. The Plan provides a wide range of evidence under various pillars (economic, health, social justice, cultural etc.) highlighting the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and puts forward recommendations which would help to mitigate against this impact. This Summary Report will present evidence from various sections under each of these pillars, which should be considered by the UK Government in all decision-making and recovery planning relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Economic Justice Pillar

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. 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.

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 employment.[1]

[1] Equality Commission Northern Ireland (ECNI) (2018) 'Delivering Equality Employment - Key Inequalities'

Women constitute over 70% of health and social care staff in the UK (79% in Northern Ireland), with a significant proportion from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. For many this involves a double burden, as women also undertake the majority of unpaid care work. 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 boys.[2] During the lockdown, these responsibilities have increased significantly, particularly for women who have faced increased responsibilities in relation to home schooling, providing basic health care, childcare, shopping for vulnerable family members, ensuring dependents are abiding by new health and hygiene requirements and more.

According to the World Economic Forum, gender segregated labour markets and a lack of gender parity has a negative fundamental bearing on whether or not economies and societies thrive.[3] Significantly, strong correlations can be found between high levels of unpaid work per day and the inability to access economic participation and opportunity.[4][5] The findings from the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report 2020 also highlight the strong correlation between a country's gender gap and its economic performance. The WEF argue that this economic evidence "highlights the message to policy-makers that countries that want to remain competitive and inclusive will need to make gender equality a critical part of their nation's human capital development."[6]

When looking specifically at Northern Ireland (NI), 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).[7] Research from Carers NI shows that Northern Ireland's carers save the economy £4.6 billion per year;[8] whilst unpaid carers across all the UK provide social care worth £57 billion per year.[9] 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.

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[2] UN Women (2019), 'Families in a Changing World', *Progress of the World's Women 2019-2020*, p.15.
[3] World Economic Forum (2020) 'Mind the 100 Year Gap', *Global Gender Gap Report 2020.*
[4] Ibid, p.14.
[5] Parker, C. (2017), 'It's official: women work nearly an hour longer than men every day', *World Economic Forum.*
[6] Ibid (n3), p 33.
[7] WRDA (2020), 'Gender Inequality in Northern Ireland: Where are we in 2020?', *Bold Women Blogging.*
[8] Carers NI (2015), 'NI Carers save government £4.6 billion a year'; see also: Carers NI (2017) 'State of Caring 2017',
[9] Office for National Statistics (2017), 'Unpaid carers provide social care worth £57 billion'

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 began.[10] 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 four.[11] Given the disproportionate levels of unpaid caring responsibilities taken on by women, and the drastic impact this has on women's participation in paid work, a gendered lens is needed in addressing the segregation of care work to prevent further embedding gender inequality.

In Northern Ireland, 70% of workers that are ineligible for Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) and 82% of part-time workers are women, in large part due to their additional caring responsibilities such as those mentioned above. Given the precarious nature of much of this 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. Notably, women are underrepresented in higher-paying jobs in every sector in Northern Ireland.[12]

When looking at the UK as a whole, the WPG recommends the widespread use of gender-budgeting and progressive fiscal and monetary policy making from the UK government. In particular, the WPG would like to endorse calls from Tax Justice UK in agreeing common goals to build back a better world affected by coronavirus. These calls include drastic tax reform across the UK. as Tax Justice UK have highlighted that: "*A fair tax system should underpin more investment in high quality public services and we must be ready to challenge those who are already arguing for austerity 2.0.*"[13]

Women's Poverty and Austerity

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

[10] Carers Week (2020), 'Carers Week 2020 Research Report: The rise in the number of unpaid carers during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak', *Making Caring Visible*, p.4.
[11] Ibid.
[12] NI Assembly Research and Information Service, (2020), 'Who Runs Northern Ireland? A Summary of Statistics Relating to Gender and Power in 2020'
[13] Tax Justice UK (2020) 'Progressive groups call for tax reform post-covid'

women.[14] 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.

The health and economic impacts of COVID-19 have been compounded by the aftermath of the 2008 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 years.[15] 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."[16]

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children[17] has shown that parents who were caught in poverty pre-crisis were around 50% more likely to have lost their jobs than parents who were better off. Further, the research showed that 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 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.[18]

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.[19]The Coronavirus 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

[14] Cracknell, R., and Keen, R. (2017) "Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes" Commons Briefing Papers [SN06758]
[15] International Monetary Fund (2020), 'World Economic Outlook, April 2020: The Great Lockdown', p.27.
[16] Ibid, p.30.
[17] Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children (2020) 'A lifeline for our children: Strengthening the social security system for families with children during this pandemic' [Briefing]
[18] Institute for Social and Economic Research (2020) Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study, COVID-19 Survey, Briefing Note, University of Essex.
[19] Black, J. (2020) "Coronavirus crisis sees demand for foodbanks in Northern Ireland soar" Belfast Telegraph [article]

totalled 65,700 with a ten-fold increase in new claims recorded at the height of the crisis in mid-March.[20]

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. 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.[21]

Monetary policy options may seem limited in this climate; however, we are 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 tools.[22] 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.

Increasing Debt

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

Levels of savings in Northern Ireland are generally lower than the rest of the UK. According to Financial Conduct Authority research[23] only 52% of adults

[20] Department for Communities (2020) 'Minister publishes information on impact of COVID-19 on Universal Credit Claims'
[21] Women's Budget Group (WBG) (2020) 'Easing Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women'
[22] Ibid, (n15), p.28.
[23] Financial Conduct Authority (2018) 'The financial lives of consumers across the UK: Key findings from the FCA's Financial Lives Survey 2017'

in Northern Ireland have a savings account, compared to 59% in the UK. Further, 54% of adults in Northern Ireland have either no cash savings or savings of less than £2,000 compared with 46% in Wales, 45% in England and 43% in Scotland.

A greater proportion of people in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK are considered potentially vulnerable due to their financial circumstances. 56% said they could cover their living expenses for less than a week if the main source of household income was lost. This compares to the UK average of 50%. This leaves them less able to cope with any sudden change of circumstances or income shocks such as that presented by the pandemic. Many people on low incomes with little or no savings who find themselves in these situations will have no other option than to borrow money. These families often struggle to manage their debts and are vulnerable to spiralling into problem debt.

StepChange debt advice charity has said that 4.6 million households risk building up dangerous levels of debt because of the pandemic, estimating that 4.6 million people will have accumulated an additional £1,076 of arrears and £997 of debt on average each because of the health crisis.[24] The charity also reported that around 4.2 million people had borrowed to make ends meet, mostly by using a credit card (1.7 million), overdraft (1.6 million) or a high-cost product such as a payday loan (980,000). According to StepChange, as many as 2.7 million people have used payment holidays on mortgages and credit products that were brought in after talks between ministers and the banking industry.

In 2020, a survey by Turn2US[25] on the impact of Coronavirus on UK households showed that 1.2 million single parents were anticipating that they would be living on £1,000 or less within four months of the pandemic, an increase of 216,000 compared to February, before COVID-19 measures began. Gingerbread research shows that few single parents have a financial buffer with almost six in ten (59%) rarely or never saving money while approximately half view keeping up with their bills and credit commitments as at least a 'constant struggle.'[26]

Debt advice agencies report that single parents may be particularly vulnerable to debt as they are more likely to be in low-paid and part-time work as well as disproportionately impacted by welfare reform and increases in the cost of living. StepChange reports that single parents made

[24] StepChange (2020) "Coronavirus and personal debt: a financial recovery strategy for households
[25] Turn2US (2020) Insight Briefing: Coronavirus
[26] Gingerbread (2019) 'Scraping and Saving' [Research Report]

up 23% of their clients in 2018 yet represent only 6% of the UK population. StepChange reported that 85% of their single parent clients are female.[27] In Northern Ireland, Christians Against Poverty (CAP) reported that 27% of their clients are single parents (25% are single mothers).[28]

As Universal Credit will be the main benefit claimed by those who have lost their jobs, or who have suffered reduced incomes as a result of the pandemic. Research by StepChange shows that a quarter of all people in Britain who receive Universal Credit are facing very serious debt problems. This figure is three times the rate in the general population (8%) and 11% more than those receiving legacy benefits (14%).

Citizens Advice reports[29] that in a survey of those who applied for Universal Credit as a result of the Coronavirus outbreak, more than half (53%) have faced hardship during the five-week wait for their first payment. The five-week wait for Universal Credit has been described as "a real shock for people navigating the benefits system for the first time" by a welfare adviser in Citizens Advice in evidence to the Work & Pensions Committee.

Pre-crisis ONS data[30] shows that women are consistently more vulnerable to poverty; highlighting that borrowing and debt is therefore far from gender neutral. Many women who are struggling financially on benefits and low-income work are vulnerable to high-cost credit and, in some cases, this can lead to a never-ending spiral of debt.

Childcare

The Women's Policy Group supports the Childcare for All Campaign and believes that a universal, free and high-quality childcare provision, which meets the diverse needs of children, is essential for economic recovery in Northern Ireland. This is fundamental to facilitating women's participation in the economy and society more generally; including impacting their ability to access paid work, education and training and progressing gender equality in paid and unpaid work, as women are more likely to be childcare providers.

[27] StepChange (2019) 'Life Happens, Understanding financial resilience in a world of uncertainty'
[28] Christians Against Poverty (2019) Changing perceptions: Northern Ireland edition' [Client Report]
[29] Citizens Advice (2016) "Coronavirus claimants facing further hardship in wait for Universal Credit" [Press Release]
[30] ONS (2020) 'Early indicator estimates from the Wealth and Assets Survey: Bills and Credit Commitments, April 2018 to September 2019'

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 is a key component to any pathway to recovery. 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 employed.[31]

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 discrimination,[32]
- Five years after a child's birth, only 13% of mums have increased earnings compared to 26% of dads,[33]
- 56.2% of mothers had to make a change to their employment due to childcare, compared to 22.4% of fathers,[34]
- 1/3 requests for flexible work were rejected by the employer,[35]
- 87% of men in paid work were full-time workers compared to 59% of women,[36]

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). 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.

A Feminist Green Economy

Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK or Ireland with no binding greenhouse gas reduction targets and this needs to change urgently. It is

[31] Adams, R. (2020), 'UK childcare industry 'crushed' by coronavirus crisis', The Guardian [article], see also: Berry, C. (2020), 'If we need childcare to reopen the UK economy, why is it so undervalued?' The Guardian [article].
[32] ONS (2019) Families and the Labour Market, p.5.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] TUC (2019) 'Good work plan: Proposals to better support families', p.6
[36] ONS (2019) Families and the Labour Market, p.6.

crucial that any targets set in a Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill are based on the most up-to-date scientific evidence available, rather than political opinion.[37] The Women's Policy Group (WPG) NI endorses the UK Women's Budget Group (WBG) and Women's Environmental Network (WEN) paper for the WBG Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, *'Towards a Feminist Green New Deal for the UK.'*[38] The WPG would add that in the context of Northern Ireland, women's involvement in peacebuilding processes should also be a priority in any Green New Deal, as set out in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.[39] The WPG would also like to endorse the following evidence and recommendations from the Feminist Green New Deal:

> *"WBG research indicates that a 2% GDP investment in care (social care, childcare, parental leave etc.), creates double the amount of jobs for women and almost as many for men than the same investment in construction[40]. Investment in free universal childcare especially, returns almost all of its initial investment"*[41]

This is of particular importance to Northern Ireland given our calls for a universal, free and high-quality childcare provision. If the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Department of Education, introduce free universal childcare, statistics from the WBG submission to HM Treasury indicate that a full return would be made on this investment through additional tax revenue generated by the additional jobs created.[42]

Paramilitarism, Gate Keeping and Control of Funding

Paramilitary organisations continue to exist, despite, in most cases, ceasefires being in place and the conflict being behind us. Further, the activities that continue to come under the umbrella name of "paramilitary activity" are not the same as those carried out during the conflict. Evidently, these organisations continue to recruit new members, and to engage in activities that would ordinarily be categorised as common criminality; loan-sharking, protection rackets, and drug dealing. There is a concern that there

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[37] Women's Policy Group NI (2021) WPG Response to Discussion Document on a Climate Change Bill.
[38] Maeve Cohen and Sherilyn MacGregor (2020), 'Towards a Feminist Green New Deal for the UK: A Paper for the WBG Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy', *UK Women's Budget Group and Women's Environmental Network.*
[39] United Nations (2000) Security Council: Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) Women, Peace and Security.
[40] ITUC (2016), 'Investing in a Care Economy: A gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries',
[41] Ibid, p.1.
[42] UK WBG (2020) 'Budget Representation to HM Treasury: Invest in *Social* Infrastructure'

may be a lack of political will to truly uproot the paramilitary organisations behind some of this criminality.

Paramilitary run organisations continue to operate within many vulnerable communities, many of which are in receipt of public money. These same community workers and organisations can also act as gatekeepers within their communities, choosing favoured organisations to work alongside and choking off support to groups that may challenge or question paramilitary influence. These organisations are often highly male-dominated, leading to the silencing of women's voices within the local community and reinforcing gender divisions. **This problem has been further exacerbated by the UK's refusal to apply UNSCR 1325 to the Northern Ireland conflict.**

Paramilitaries are known to be involved in loan sharking and this particularly impacts upon those with limited incomes, especially women. Recent research by the Independent Reporting Commission, compiled by Monica McWilliams, confirms that paramilitary activity remains a constant issue in Northern Ireland, and describes the situation as one of "coercive control" of entire communities.[43]

Health Pillar

Additional Health Concerns

As of the beginning of June 2020, more than 2 million people across the UK were waiting for screening, tests and treatments since lockdown began. According to Cancer Research UK, for every week that screenings are paused, 7000 people aren't being referred for further tests and 380 cancers aren't being diagnosed. While screenings have been suspended, individuals with symptoms have been less likely to go to their GP and some GPs have been reluctant to risk sending their patients to hospitals for further tests due to the risk of COVID-19.[44]

For those needing treatments across the UK (around 12,750 waiting for cancer surgery), operations have fallen to 60% of expected levels, which will also have a long-term impact. For those receiving treatment for cancer, COVID-19 testing is still necessary before their treatment can begin, and

[43] See: Independent Reporting Commission (2021) [Website]: https://www.ircommission.org/
[44] Roberts, K. (2020) 'Over 2 million people waiting for cancer screening, tests and treatments', *Cancer Research UK*.

Cancer Research UK estimate that between 21,000 to 37,000 COVID-19 tests are needed each day to facilitate treatment; which can lead to further delays.[45]

The NHS Confederation has also estimated that NHS waiting lists 'could hit 10 million this year.'[46] In particular, medical professionals are concerned about the uphill battle they face in restarting cancer, stroke and heart care services, while continuing to manage thousands of sick and recovering COVID-19 patients while implementing social distancing measures in health settings.

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

Health Impacts of Austerity on Women

As stated previously, women in Northern Ireland were disproportionately and cruelly impacted by years of austerity and welfare reform. Not only does austerity have significant economic impacts, but it has also been proven to have profound health impacts.'[47]

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. 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.

[45] Ibid (n44).
[46] BBC News (2020) 'Coronavirus: NHS waiting lists 'could hit 10 million this year'', BBC News Health
[47] BMA (2016), 'Health in all policies: health, austerity and welfare reform: A briefing from the board of science', *British Medical Association.*

Abortion, Maternal Health and Bodily Autonomy

The Department of Health has failed to commission the full abortion services provided for in the NIO regulations[48] and has failed to enable women, girls and pregnant people to safely manage an abortion at home through telemedicine services. We need an abortion provision that is evidence-based, relies on best medical practice, and is fully implemented in the safest manner to address the difficulties around and barriers created by COVID-19. This includes telemedicine for self-managed abortions to reduce risk, provisions for those unable to take misoprostol, and full, accessible provisions for those accessing an abortion after 10 weeks gestation.

The availability and accessibility of sexual and reproductive healthcare services is crucial to women's health and well-being. Women must also be able to access sexual and reproductive health services, including contraception, emergency contraception and the means to access safe abortion care. International human rights law explicitly recognises the rights to sexual and reproductive health and bodily autonomy. These rights give rise to positive state obligations to ensure abortion-related information and services and to remove medically unnecessary barriers that deny practical access.[49]

Introducing additional barriers to abortion and/or failing to ensure abortion access during the COVID-19 pandemic contravenes UN treaty bodies' recommendations.[50] Women should not, and may not be able to, travel to access an abortion and healthcare workers should not be put at risk by requiring pregnant people to physically attend healthcare premises, this has been made clear by WHO advice. Travel was considered an unviable solution by CEDAW,[51] therefore women should be able to fully access healthcare at home during this global pandemic.

[48] UK Government (2020) "A New Legal Framework for Abortion Services in Northern Ireland" [Consultation Response]
[49] Centre for Reproductive Rights (2020) 'Breaking Ground: Treaty Monitoring Bodies on Reproductive Rights' pp 12-14
[50] Todd-Gher, J. and Shah, P. K. (2020) 'Abortion in the context of COVID-19: A Human Rights Imperative'
[51] For more information on the heavy financial, emotional and logistical burden of travelling to GB on women, see CEDAW Committee comments (2018)

Health Inequalities and Hostile Environment for Migrants and Racialised People

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities are at increased risk of poor mental health and frequently have less confidence using available services.[52] Furthermore, BAME people living in Northern Ireland are at heightened risk of discrimination and racist hate crimes.[53] Prejudice and hate crimes impart a significant psychological toll on victims. Any attempt to address the mental health needs of the Black, Asian and minority ethnic community needs to encompass a strategy to combat racism, particularly institutional racism in the health care system.

Some of the identified challenges to minority ethnic and migrant communities accessing mental health services include language barriers, discrimination, difficulty with GP registration and other aspects of accessing care, stigma associated with accessing mental health services.[54] Further, the culture and power dynamics of psychiatry, a field dominated by white men, can be off-putting to racialised people attempting to access care.

The lack of cultural competency on caring for people from ethnic minority groups, widespread language barriers, and the UK Government's hostile environment policy have ensured that these off-putting negative experiences happen more often to people of colour accessing services, to the detriment of community health. This impacts some of the most vulnerable women in society such as pregnant women, victims of trafficking and domestic violence and persons living with HIV.

UK wide data sharing continues between the NHS and the Home Office regarding migrants who have incurred a debt to the NHS.[55] It is crucial that all persons in Northern Ireland, including migrants living here without immigration status, feel safe contacting health services to report COVID-19 symptoms and to seek advice. It is not enough to remove charging practices without also making it clear that no person's data will be shared with the Home Office during the crisis. Removing barriers to access to healthcare is an approach grounded in international human rights law.

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[52] Radford, K., Sturgeon, B., Cuomo, I. And Lucas, O., (2015) 'Walking This Thin Line: BME Experiences of Mental Health and Wellbeing in Northern Ireland,' Institute for Conflict Research, p. 4.
[53] BBC News (2020) 'Racism: More than 600 cases of Hate Crime Reported to PSNI'
[54] Ibid. (n52).
[55] UK Government (2019) 'Overseas chargeable patients, NHS debt and immigration rules'

Social Justice Pillar

Racial Justice

The WPG stands in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. In 2016-17, statistics show that racially motivated hate crime overtook sectarian hate crimes[56] for the first time in the history of Northern Ireland. More recently, the PSNI recorded 936 racist incidents including 626 racist crimes[57] between April 2019 and March 2020.

The WPG supports calls for the closure of the Larne House Immigration Detention Centre in the Larne PSNI Station. This centre houses women and men together. There is no women-only recreation space and many women are forced to self-confine to their rooms due to safety concerns. The poor conditions and inadequate facilities for traumatised people needlessly incarcerated here has been highlighted by HM Inspectorate of Prisons multiple times. It is entirely inappropriate to house an immigration detention centre in a PSNI station as this prevents people with irregular immigration status from coming to the PSNI for help. This is a situation that disproportionately impacts people of colour.

In the context of COVID-19, evidence suggests that the pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on people from ethnic minority groups 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 this:[58]

- 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.

[56] PSNI (2018) "Trends in Hate Motivated Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2017/18," p.6
[57] PSNI (2020) "Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland," p.4
[58] NHS Confederation BME Leadership Network (2020) Member Briefing.

Research from the WBG, LSE, Queen Mary University of London and the Fawcett Society shows that:[59]

- 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 BAME mothers reported that they are struggling to feed their children (23.7%).
- 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%).

Politics, Public Life, Peacebuilding and Decision Making

In 2008, 2013 and 2019 the CEDAW Committee called for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in Northern Ireland, as has the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women.[60] The CEDAW Concluding Observations 2019 call for effective participation of women in post conflict reconstruction, and addressing obstacles including paramilitary intimation.[61]

Despite this, there has been little progress on increasing women's participation in securing peace in Northern Ireland or in post conflict reconstruction. The 2014 Stormont House Agreement (SHA) contained no specific mechanisms for increasing the involvement of women. Extensive consultation with women[62] found that many feel disempowered, have difficulty circumnavigating community gate-keepers (including paramilitary groups) and fear harm if they were to speak out.

[59] WBG et. al. (2020), 'BAME women and COVID-19 - Research Evidence'
[60] United Nations (1979) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Articles 1 and 2. The UK signed the Convention in 1981 and ratified in 1986.
[61] Council of Europe (2007) Gender equality standards and mechanisms: Recommendation CM/Rec (2007) 17 of the Committee of Ministers and Explanatory Memorandum.
[62] Council of Europe Convention on the prevention and combating violence against women and girls (Istanbul Convention, 2011)

The COVID-19 crisis with its particular impacts on women's income, socio-economic independence and increased caring responsibilities is likely to compound barriers to women's involvement in peacebuilding and decision-making processes. The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement committed to increasing women's representation in public and political life, yet women remain under-represented in all spheres of political life, at Westminster, in the Stormont Assembly and in local government, as well as in public life and economic decision making. The three year collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive will likely impact the 2021 target date for reaching gender equality in public appointments.

Multiple reports, including annual reports of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland; the report on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly by the Assembly Executive Review Committee (2015); the Inquiry by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on UNSCR 1325 Women, Peace and Security (2014); and repeated CEDAW Committee Concluding Observations (most recently March 2019), have concluded that women's under-representation in political and public life and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland is a serious matter to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

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. 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.

Restorative Justice

Research illustrates how restorative justice mechanisms can help to reduce levels of anger, anxiety and fear and prevent further incidents from recurring or escalating.[63] It is also clear that punitive responses such as prison sentences can have limited deterrent value and can act as breeding groups for intolerance and hate. However, any restorative justice process that is created needs to be led by victims entirely. Victims must not be put into a position where they can be pressurised by the offender, for example through the virtue of their relationship, to opt for restorative justice

[63] Judge Marrinan (2020) 'Independent Hate Crime Legislation Review Northern Ireland,' para 15.4.

measures as an alternative to seeking punitive justice. Any form of restorative justice needs to work alongside the judicial system and be made up of adequately trained professionals. Further, restorative justice should only be an option in cases of "low-level" crimes. In order to test the effectiveness on reducing recurring incidents and increasing awareness, the changing attitudes or views of the perpetrator needs to be evaluated and tested.

There are serious concerns regarding how restorative justice applies to the crime of domestic abuse. Restorative justice, even if victim-led, is not appropriate if there are power disparities between participants, and in the case of a victim and abuser, power resides with the abuser by the nature of the offence. It is widely accepted that psychological abuse is routine in these cases and it damages a victim's self-esteem to such a degree that they regularly need several abortive attempts to leave before they have the necessary resources to do so.[64]

No Recourse to Public Funds/Immigration

Since 2012, a 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) condition has been imposed on nearly all migrants granted the right to live or work in the UK. This covers a huge number of visas including those for spouses, parents and adult dependants. A report by the Migration Observatory found that around 1.376 million people hold valid UK visas that would usually be subject to the NRPF condition.[65] People who have been living, working and contributing to taxes in the UK for years are subject to this measure.

The effect of this condition is that the person holding leave is permitted to work in the UK and pays taxes but is prohibited from accessing the safety net of public funds paid for by those very taxes. Breaching a NRPF condition can result in a criminal conviction and can negatively impact future immigration status. Paragraph 6 of the Immigration Rules lists the benefits considered as 'public funds' for the purpose of the Immigration Rules.[66] This definition covers most benefits which are paid for by the state such as child benefit, housing benefit or universal credit. It does not include benefits that

[64] For more information, see: Liebmann, M. and Wootton, L. (2010), 'Restorative Justice and Domestic Violence/Abuse', HMP Cardiff.
[65] Migration Observatory (2020) 'Between a rock and a hard place: the Covid-19 crisis and migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)'
[66] UK Immigration Rules 25th February 2016.

are based on National Insurance contributions, such as statutory sick pay or statutory maternity pay.

Some people who have a NRPF condition on their visa can apply to have it lifted, but they must show they have become destitute, or particularly compelling reasons relating to the welfare of a child, or exceptional circumstances relating to their finances. This option is also limited to persons on certain visa routes such as family and private life. Applying to have NRPF lifted can also result in your visa renewal period being changed to a ten-year route; effectively doubling the time it will take for the person to gain indefinite leave to remain in the UK.[67]

The policy also disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups such as single parent households, pregnant women and people subject to domestic violence, leaving them without the safety net of social welfare and throwing families into destitution.[68] This was exacerbated during the coronavirus crisis as job losses and economic uncertainty left people subject to NRPF unable to access support, leaving them forced to work in unsafe conditions, trapped in unsafe housing, and unable to self-isolate and support their families.

There is a vocal movement from Westminster and external stakeholders calling for the suspension or complete lifting of NRPF in light of the coronavirus crisis.[69] Boris Johnson has even appeared to call for a review into the policy on the 27th May 2020 when he stated before the Liaison Committee "people who've worked hard for this country who live and work here should have support of one kind or another."[70]

Brexit and a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland

Brexit and the Impact on Women: Rights at Risk

Women in Northern Ireland are greatly underrepresented in public and political life. Underrepresentation in political negotiations and decision-making, alongside several other areas lacking in gender parity, highlight the

[67] UK Government (2014) 'Application for change of conditions of leave to allow access to public funds if your circumstances change'
[68] Maternity Action (2020) 'Migrant Women, No Recourse to Public Funds and the Pandemic'
[69] The Guardian (2020) 'Scrap UK rule that has left 1m migrant workers at risk of destitution, say MPs'
[70] The Guardian (2020) 'If Boris Johnson is baffled by Britain's cruel migration laws he should change them'

profoundly negative impact Brexit is set to have on women in Northern Ireland. This is compounded by the political instability in Northern Ireland which creates barriers to women having their voices heard, as well as the current prioritisation by governments of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Many areas of women's human rights have yet to be achieved, and Brexit has added a new threat to existing, hard-fought rights women currently have. Northern Ireland faces unique constitutional complexities meaning Brexit presents a unique threat to this region.[71]

Women's Rights Achieved Through EU Membership

Many of the rights we enjoy today have come through membership of the EU over the past four decades; particularly in areas of economic activity and employment law. Some of these protections include:

- Equality between men and women,[72]
- The right to equal pay for equal work,[73]
- Protection against discrimination on the ground of pregnancy and maternity,[74]
- Introducing measures to provide specific advantages to the underrepresented gender,[75]
- Prohibition of discriminations on the grounds of sex,[76]
- Introduction of paid holidays.[77]

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

Other areas of EU legislation, representation and funding that are relevant to the protection and enhancement of women's rights and participation

[71] Human Rights Consortium (2018), 'Brexit and Northern Ireland: Rights at Risk Report', p.32.
[72] The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (2012).
[73] Article 119 Treaty (2016) establishing the European Economic Community.
[74] Equality Commission Northern Ireland (2016) "Expecting Equality: A Formal Investigation into the Treatment of Pregnant Workers and Mothers in NI Workplaces."
[75] Ibid.
[76] Sex and other grounds for discrimination are covered in Article 21, EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (Ibid n72)
[77] According to the NIRWN, Rural Voices Report (2018) p.30: 'Many of the two million workers who had no paid holiday before the Working Time Directive, were part-time working women'; See also: Human Rights Consortium Rights at Risk Report,, p.75.

include the European Protection order, which is significant in recognising women's rights as they cross the border; the Rural Development Programme, which NIRWN highlight as significant given historic government underinvestment in rural women,[78] the European Social Fund, which is important to increasing women's access to the workforce; and the European Parliamentary Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, alongside various EU funding streams that support the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland.

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (ECHR) and Case Law

One of the most concerning pledges of the UK government has been to remove the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights from all applications in UK law and judiciary systems. Whilst the UK government would still be required to abide by the European Convention of Human Rights, the removal of the EU Charter is deeply worrying as it has a much broader level of protection for human rights.[79] Articles relevant to women in Northern Ireland include, but are not limited to, Article 20 on the right to equality before law; Article 21 which prohibits discrimination; Article 23 on the right to equality between men and women; Article 34 on the right to social security; and Article 35 on the right to healthcare.

Future case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) will no longer be binding in UK courts post-Brexit. Any existing CJEU laws from before Brexit will still be binding, however, these can now be overturned in future cases in UK courts and a departure from current jurisprudence may lead to a divergence on human rights standards on either side of the border in Northern Ireland. As EU human rights instruments will be seen as invalid post-Brexit, it will be difficult to enforce human rights through the courts or hold UK government failures to account in courts outside of the UK.

Human Rights Act 1998

In the lead up to the Brexit referendum, many calls were made to repeal or replace the UK Human Rights Act post-Brexit. Since the 2016 referendum, the UK Government has failed to provide commitments that it will not repeal or replace the Human Rights Act. Many are deeply concerned with the impact this, and the removal of the EU Charter, will have on human

[78] NIRWN (2018), 'Rural Voices Report: Action Research and Policy Priorities for Rural Women 2018', p.5.
[79] A comparison of the breadth of the EU Charter and the ECHR can be found in the Human Rights Consortium Rights at Risk Report, p.26-27.

rights. The EU human rights framework is much more robust than the UK Human Rights Act, however, the removal of both the Human Rights Act and the EU Charter will make it much more difficult for people to access their rights through the courts, as the ECHR is nowhere near as broad or strong as a standalone human rights framework.

Good Friday Agreement

There have been worrying reinterpretations of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement by the current Prime Minister Boris Johnson, in a vastly different approach to previous UK Governments, with EU officials accusing Prime Minister Johnson of reneging on pledges to uphold the agreement.[80] It is essential to point out the importance of avoiding a divergence of rights on either side of the border.

For example, areas of protections such as violence against women, or child maintenance payments, rely on EU wide measures to ensure the legal systems on the island of Ireland are coordinated to protect vulnerable people through the criminal justice and family law systems.[81] This is essential to ensure that people cannot avoid the repercussions of violence against women, or refusing to pay child maintenance, by simply crossing the border. All aspects of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement need to be protected and implemented; including a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland where specific focus can be given to the rights of women.

Missed Opportunities: Current EU Work on Rights

There are many missed future opportunities for the enhancement of rights that would benefit the lives of women in Northern Ireland. For example, as highlighted by the Human Rights Consortium, the EU has also sought to extend parental rights to leave[82] and encourage better childcare support for families[83] with the strategic aim of reducing the gender pay gap and advancing women's rights more generally. Furthermore, as NIRWN have highlighted,[84] there is a new, ongoing consultation of trade unions and employers launched at EU level focusing on a new package of rights to

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[80] See: Rankin, J., (2019), 'Johnson has reneged on Good Friday Agreement Vows Says EU', *The Guardian*; see also: Hughes, B. (2020), 'Brexit: Good Friday Agreement Cannot Slip Through The Cracks in US Trade Deal Talks', *Irish News*.
[81] EU Council (2003) "Directive 2003/8/EC: Legal aid in civil and commercial matters" [EU Legislation]
[82] EU Council (2010) Directive 2010/18/EU implementing the revised Framework Agreement on parental leave
[83] European Commission (2013) "Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage" Recommendations.
[84] NIRWN (2018), 'Rural Voices Report: Action Research and Policy Priorities for Rural Women 2018', p.30.

improve work-life balance, including proposals for carers' leave, flexible working and stronger protections from dismissal for new mothers.[85]

In particular, with uncertainty of what will happen to the customs union and the freedom of movement across the EU, it is unlikely that caring responsibilities, and the rights associated with them, will be improved or advocated for post-Brexit. The UK Women's Budget Group maintains that women will be adversely impacted by the economic impacts of Brexit.[86] This can only get worse for the women of Northern Ireland, who have greatly suffered from the past decade of austerity and are deeply concerned about the impact of welfare reform[87] and future austerity on gender equality.[88]

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

A series of agreements in Northern Ireland in recent years[89] have made mention of a Bill of Rights without making any actual progress towards delivering this. Indeed, in the New Decade New Approach document, beyond provision for new languages legislation, there is little evidence of positive progress in advancing the legal protection of rights formally.

Provision for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, which was to build upon the rights contained within the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) by including supplementary rights influenced by International Standards and our local circumstances, was provided for in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and voted for by an overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland through referendum. This commitment to establishing a framework of human rights that was to run throughout the Agreement and the government institutions it established was to be an important confidence building measure in society.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) provided advice on the content of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland in 2008, and called for the inclusion of additional economic, social and cultural rights such as: the right to health (including access to gender-sensitive and appropriate healthcare services and information), the right to an adequate standard of

[85] Trades Union Congress (TUC) (2016) 'Women workers' rights and the risks of Brexit'
[86] UK Women's Budget Group (2017) 'Economic Impact of Brexit on Women'
[87] Harding, S. (2019), 'Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives', *Women's Regional Consortium*.
[88] NIWEP (2018), 'Women and gender equality in a changing Europe: A roundtable to explore women's priorities in Brexit' [Unpublished]
[89] New Decade New Approach (2020), A Fresh Start (2015), Stormont House Agreement (2014)

living, the right to work (including fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value without distinction of any kind), environmental rights, social security rights and children's rights (including play and leisure).[90]

A Bill of Rights for NI based on a model advised by the NIHRC would have provided a practical mechanism for the realisation of many of the rights contained within international treaties of which the UK is a signatory. The advice was based on extensive participatory consultation with thousands of people across NI over the course of 8 years, and therefore represents a clear articulation of public opinion in this regard. However, in December 2009, the UK government produced a consultation document, which rejected the majority of the advice provided by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.[91] Since the 2009 advice there have been a number of additional developments which merit consideration for inclusion in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. In order to protect enjoyment of the full range of ECHR rights, they should be fully incorporated into a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

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

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

[90] NIHRC (2008) 'A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: Advice to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland'
[91] Northern Ireland Office (2009), *'A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: Next Steps'* [Consultation Paper]

International Best Practice

The UK, including Northern Ireland, has obligations under international law to recognise gender-based violence against women as a specific human rights issue. As a State Party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UK is required to take action on gender equality, which the Convention defines as a prerequisite to women and girls enjoying their full human rights. The CEDAW Committee has highlighted the importance of action in Northern Ireland in their Concluding Observations to all recent periodic reports submitted by the UK. The most recent Concluding Observations (2019) emphasise putting protections for women in Northern Ireland on an equal footing with protections elsewhere in the UK.

The UK is also a member of the Council of Europe - it established the integration of gender equality as one of its policy goals. The Council has adopted Standards for Gender Equality,[92] which set out a list of measures to be taken across policy areas, including violence against women. The Standards state that "Violence against women is one of the most serious violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and an obstacle to the enjoyment of those rights and freedoms."

In 2011, the Council adopted the Istanbul Convention on preventing violence against women and combating domestic violence, which sets out clear standards for states to implement. Compliance with requirements is essential to enable states to ratify the Convention; the UK is yet to ratify. It is vital that concerted action across the UK is taken to ensure the UK is compliant with the Convention and can complete ratification.

Amnesty International UK - International Outlook

In May 2020, Amnesty International, Women's Link Worldwide and International Planned Parenthood Federation published 'A Guide for Europe: Protecting the Rights of Women and Girls in times of Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath.'[93] The guide highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic —like all crises—has a distinct impact on women and girls that is

[92] Council of Europe (2007) Gender equality standards and mechanisms: Recommendation CM/Rec (2007) 17 of the Committee of Ministers and Explanatory Memorandum.

[93] Amnesty International (2020) "A Guide for Europe: Protecting the rights of women and girls in times of Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath" *Women's Link Worldwide and International Planned Parenthood Federation*

both immediate and that poses the risk of exacerbating pre-existing gender-based and other intersecting inequalities. This crisis has exposed the structural and systemic discrimination that women and girls have long faced. Unless their rights are protected, their voices are heard and their needs are met, they will be further deprived of justice.

The United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, the Council of Europe, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and other regional and international bodies have issued clear guidelines that States should use to respond to the pandemic in line with their human rights obligations. As UN Women has noted, violence against women is "the most widespread human rights violation in the world."[94]

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform - International Outlook

The European Women's Lobby (EWL), which is the umbrella network for women's networks in Europe, integrates a focus on feminist economics in its work. EWL has developed proposals for a financial solidarity plan[95] for Europe in response to the pandemic, which aim to ensure that the recovery is gender responsive, not only at European level but in all EU member states. While the UK is no longer a member of the EU, the proposals in the plan are relevant to both the UK as a whole and to Northern Ireland. They are focused on a recovery which is based on a human rights framework and on feminist economics.

The brief emphasises that women must be equally represented in decision-making processes and women's civil society organisations must be sustainably funded both in the immediate and longer term. There are also specific recommendations for combating male violence and supporting victims and survivors, and ensuring women and girls have access to health care, including reproductive health care. Key recommendations for an economic response and recovery include providing gender-responsive social and economic measures to support women and girls in precarious situations, including those at risk of losing their jobs, those at risk of living in poverty, and/or those experiencing in-work poverty.

[94] Ibid (n93)
[95] European Women's Lobby (April 2020) Women must not pay the price for COVID-19!

The Purple Pact: Economics that work for women

The EWL proposals for COVID-19 recovery draw above all on The Purple Pact,[96] an EWL initiative launched in early 2020, which sets out principles for feminist economics in Europe. The aim of the Pact is economic wellbeing for all and full participation of women in all areas of life, and it also emphasises that feminist economics strives for peace and wellbeing for all, on a healthy planet. The core proposal of the Pact is a new economic framework based on three pillars: (1) A new macro-economic policy framework encompassing three fundamental dimensions: economic justice, social justice and environmental justice (2) A universal social care system with an infrastructure that can provide social and care services for all and quality services which are accessible and affordable. (3) An inclusive labour market where equality, social protection and caring take centre stage.

Initiatives at UN level

The UN Global Compact[97] has developed a series of policy briefs designed to guide stakeholders on policy and practical action designed to support companies to recover stronger and build back better.[98] These include a brief on gender equality,[99] which emphasises the critical role women play in sustainable and resilient economies, while highlighting the specific gendered issues and risks that the pandemic has underlined. The brief also provides access to resources developed within the UN, including gender impact assessment tools and checklists for gender responsive recovery. Actions recommended by the Compact in this brief include:

- Ensure women's representation and inclusion in all planning and decision-making, specifically with COVID-19-related policies and responses.
- Provide flexible working arrangements as well as paid sick, family and emergency leave for parents and caretakers, keeping in mind that the majority of unpaid care work falls to women.
- Support employment and income protection for women across the value chain.

[96] European Women's Lobby (March 2020) The Purple Pact: A feminist approach to the economy
[97] UN Global Impact Support for Businesses Resource [Website]
[98] UN Global Impact (2020) 20th Anniversary Campaign [Website]
[99] UN Global Compact (2020) COVID-19 Impact Brief: Gender Equality

- Honour existing contracts with women-owned businesses, support their recovery and engage with them as supply chains are re-established.
- Ensure access to quality healthcare for all women and girls, especially as resources are diverted to address the pandemic.
- Collect data disaggregated by gender, age and other factors to track the impact of all response efforts.
- Help challenge gender norms through marketing and advertising, encouraging unpaid care to be shared more equally.
- Chief executive officers and executive teams can publicly signal their commitment to the advancement of gender equality, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, by signing the CEO Statement of Support for the Women's Empowerment Principles.

UN Women, the UN's agency for gender equality, has been very active both in providing concrete support, particularly in vulnerable countries, and developing guidance for stakeholders on how gender equality can be effectively integrated in COVID-19 response and recovery. They have been particularly active in highlighting the need for action to protect women and girls from gender-based violence; this has been reflected throughout the UN response to the pandemic. A key briefing[100] highlights the increase in violence that has been a global trend, sets out examples of action taken in a number of jurisdictions, and also outlines the economic impact of violence against women and girls, estimated at US $1.5 trillion.

Key actions set out for governments include ensuring appropriate resourcing for organisations supporting victims and survivors of gender based and domestic violence, and also ensuring women are at the centre of policy change, response and recovery. A critical element needed is gender-disaggregated data to fully understand the impact of COVID-19 on women, domestic violence and also on the economic activities of women. UN Women has also published guidance[101] on the actions parliamentarians and governments can take to ensure gender equality is embedded in COVID-19 recovery and response planning. This guidance emphasises that women are overrepresented in the economic sectors hardest hit by the pandemic, and also overrepresented in informal and precarious work.

[100] UN Women (April 2020) COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls
[101] UN Women (June 2020) A primer on parliamentary action: Gender sensitive responses to COVID-19

Conclusion

Throughout the WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan, the Women's Policy Group have provided substantial evidence and recommendations under various pillars for the UK Government on how to mitigate against the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women. Some of our key recommendations include:

1) Gender budgeting should be applied to all UK government COVID-19 recovery planning (and to government policy-making more generally),
2) Government stimulus packages should be made available, funded through significant tax reform and increased government borrowing in an era of historically low interest rates,
3) Funding shortfalls in Northern Ireland should be addressed (beyond the Barnett consequential allocations),
4) Austerity measures should be avoided in economic recovery planning,
5) Introduce a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights,
6) Take measures to ensure recovery plans for COVID-19 dismantle the deep systemic inequalities that exist across the UK rather than exacerbate them,
7) Make efforts to obtain comprehensive gender disaggregated data,
8) Take urgent action to address the UK-wide gender pay gap.

The recommendations in this plan are based on evidence from women across the UK; including from trade unions, human rights organisations and medical professionals. The UK government is responsible for the human rights of all UK citizens, including those in Northern Ireland, and urgent action should be taken to ensure this responsibility is fully met. Further information on the issues raised in this report can be found in the full WPG Feminist Recovery Plan, which can be accessed here. For questions or queries regarding the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan, please contact:

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