

# **Women's Policy Group NI**

## **Women's Policy Group NI Response to 'Department for Economy Skills Strategy or Northern Ireland: Skills for a 10x Economy' Public Consultation**

August 2021

Prepared by:

Rachel Powell

Women's Sector Lobbyist

Women's Resource and Development Agency

[rachel.powell@wrda.net](mailto:rachel.powell@wrda.net)

## Contents

1. Introduction: .....	4
2. WRDA Putting Women at the Heart of Public Consultations: .....	4
3. Endorsements:.....	10
4. Department for Economy Skills Strategy: WPG Comments:.....	11
5. WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan - Summary of Evidence Relevant to the Northern Ireland Skills Strategy : .....	14
5.1 Women's Employment and Gender Pay Gap Reporting .....	14
5.1.1 Women's Employment in Northern Ireland .....	14
5.1.2 Insecure and Low-Paid Work - The Gender Dimension.....	16
5.1.3 The Gender Pay Gap and Pay Inequalities .....	17
5.1.3.1 Gender Pay Gap Reporting Legislation .....	20
5.1.4 The Motherhood Penalty .....	22
5.1.5 Family Leave Frameworks .....	24
5.1.6 Flexible Working.....	25
5.1.7 Parental Leave.....	26
5.1.8 Paternity Leave .....	27
5.1.9 Sex Discrimination .....	28
5.1.10 Trade Union Membership and Collective Bargaining .....	30
5.2 Gender Segregated Labour Markets and Care Work.....	31
5.2.1 Industrial and Occupational Segregation.....	32
5.2.2 UK-wide and Global Data on Segregation and Care Work .....	33
5.2.3 Northern Ireland Specific Data on Segregation and Care Work.....	42
5.2.4 Addressing Women's Employment and the Skills Barometer .....	55
5.3 Women's Poverty and Austerity.....	57
5.4 Childcare .....	57
5.4.1 Childcare in Northern Ireland.....	57
5.4.2 The Women's Centres Childcare Fund (WCCF).....	67
5.5 Rural Women .....	69
5.5.1 Rural Women Economy - Context .....	69
5.5.2 Rural Business.....	70
5.5.3 Rural VCSE.....	72
5.5.4 Gender and the Rural Economy .....	74

5.5.5 Rural Women and the Digital Economy .....	74
5.6 Feminist Green Economy .....	75
5.6.1 Why is Climate Justice a Feminist Issue? .....	76
5.6.2 Care Work: A Key Sustainable Industry .....	77
5.6.3 A Feminist Green New Deal for Northern Ireland.....	78
5.7 Education and Training .....	83
5.7.1 Equality Proofing Education Post-COVID-19.....	83
5.7.2 Equality and Diversity Education .....	85
5.7.3 Community Based Adult Education and Training.....	88
5.7.4 Gender Inequality and Apprenticeships NI .....	89
5.8 Digital Divide and Access Poverty .....	90
5.9 A Caring Economy.....	93
6. Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report .....	95
WPG Response to Consultation Questions: .....	96

# 1. Introduction:

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

The WPG is endorsed as a voice that represents all women of Northern Ireland on a policy level. This group has collective expertise on protected characteristics and focus on identifying the intersectional needs of all women. The WPG membership is broad and has a deep understanding of how best to approach the impact COVID-19 is having on women in Northern Ireland. Within the Feminist Recovery Plan (FRP) launched in 2020, the WPG provided a comprehensive overview of the severe impact of the pandemic on groups from protected characteristics, particularly women, and used this evidence to make recommendations to policymakers. The issues, evidence and recommendations made by the WPG within the Feminist Recovery Plan is crucial to the Skills Strategy, and must be incorporated into any strategy going forward in Northern Ireland over the next 10 years.

## 2. 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 Department for Economy 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.”

---

<sup>1</sup> WRDA (2018) ‘Putting Women at the Heart of Public Consultations: Guidelines for Public Authorities’: [https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/WRDA\\_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf](https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/WRDA_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf)

## 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 an issue as crucial as a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights. 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.”

This guide is relating to public consultations, and although the Ad Hoc Committee have stated that this is a public survey rather than a public consultation, many of these principles still apply. These tips are particularly important for ongoing engagement outreach by the Ad Hoc Committee in future work relating to a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights.

Our key recommendations/tips for public bodies on including women in public consultation [or survey] 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. Remember there is a very great likelihood that some women will have never given their views in a group before and would

**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-judgemental 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's just a line to say 'child-friendly' or 'childcare available on request'?

### **3. Keep your language accessible and relevant**

- It's 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 end 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's 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're 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're 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's 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**

- Don't be afraid to highlight the gendered nature of an issue being addressed by public policy. Gender neutral policy is ineffective - we don't 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](#).

### 3. Endorsements:

The Women's Policy Group would like to fully endorse the responses from the **Women's Regional Consortium (WRC)** and the **Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (NIWBG)**.

Both of these groups are members of the Women's Policy Group, and several members of the WPG are also represented in the membership of both the WRC and NIWBG.

The WPG would like to fully endorse both of these responses. As the WPG response to the Skills Strategy will primarily focus on the evidence and data we have compiled for the WPG Feminist Recovery Plans, we wish to take this opportunity to particularly endorse the evidence relating to the impact of poverty and austerity on women and the contribution of the women's sector and women's centres to skills development through the WRC response as well as the evidence relating to gender budgeting, issues with the skills barometer/apprenticeships and a caring economy in the NIWBG response.

## 4. Department for Economy Skills Strategy: WPG Comments:

The WPG welcomes the aims and vision of the Skills strategy to develop a '10x Economy' whereby Northern Ireland will see a decade of innovation to encourage greater collaboration and innovation to deliver a ten times better economy with benefits for all our people<sup>2</sup>.

The Skills Strategy [hereafter, 'the strategy'] aims to realise this ambition 'by focusing on innovation in areas where we have real strengths and making sure these gains mean something to all businesses, people and places in Northern Ireland. Overall we will see a positive impact on our economic, societal and environmental wellbeing'<sup>3</sup>.

While the WPG certainly agrees with this vision and aims to realise this ambition, we are concerned by a number of major gaps in this strategy for the next 10 years. Throughout this response, we will respond to the consultation questions while also highlighting the significant gaps within this strategy which will prevent women from benefiting equally.

Before addressing the specific questions asked in the Consultation document, we would like to highlight a number of issues which cannot be separated from issues relating to skills in Northern Ireland. These are issues that the WPG believes should be given consideration and addressed in any 10 year Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland. These issues have been covered in detail in both the WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan 2020<sup>4</sup> and our recently relaunched WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: One Year On (2021). A summary of all relevant evidence, data and recommendations of the WPG Feminist Recovery Plans which are missing from the Skills Strategy will now be provided.

---

<sup>2</sup> Department for Economy Skills Strategy 2021, p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan 2020: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WPG-NI-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-2020-.pdf>; WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan Relaunch: One Year On (2021): <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf>

*The original, and relaunched, Feminist Recovery Plans were prepared by:*



Rachel Powell (Women's Resource and Development Agency)  
Elaine Crory (Women's Resource and Development Agency)  
Clare Anderson (Women's Resource and Development Agency)  
Jonna Monaghan (Northern Ireland Women's European Platform)  
Siobhán Harding (Women's Support Network)  
Alexa Moore (Transgender NI)  
Robyn Scott (Committee on the Administration of Justice)  
Eliza Browning (Committee on the Administration of Justice)  
Uná Boyd (Committee on the Administration of Justice)  
Louise Coyle (Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network)  
Clare Moore (Irish Congress of Trade Unions)  
Geraldine Alexander (Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance)  
Helen Flynn (Human Rights Consortium)  
Helen Crickard (Reclaim the Agenda)  
Gráinne Teggart (Amnesty International UK)  
Emma Osbourne (Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland)  
Sonya McMullan (Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland)  
Karen Devlin (Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland)  
Aisha O'Reilly (Politics Plus)  
Karen Sweeney (Women's Support Network)  
Jacqui McLoughlin (Women's Forum NI)  
Kendall Bousquet (Migrant Centre NI)  
Aoife Mallon (Feminist Recovery Plan Independent Contractor)  
Alexandra Chapman (Employers for Childcare)  
Aoife Hamilton (Employers for Childcare)  
Aoife Clements (50:50 NI)  
Alexandra Brennan (Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group)

Coumilah Manjoo (Belfast Multicultural Association)

Naomi Green (Belfast Islamic Centre)

Michelle Rouse (Ulster University / ARK / Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group)

Emma Campbell (Alliance for Choice)

Jill McManus (Alliance for Choice/Medical Students for Choice)

*The content of this paper 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

Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network

Transgender NI

Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance

Irish Congress of Trade Unions Northern Ireland Committee

Reclaim the Night Belfast

Committee on the Administration of Justice

Politics Plus

Belfast Feminist Network

HERe NI

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform

Reclaim the Agenda

Alliance for Choice

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

Women's Support Network

DemocraShe

Raise Your Voice

## 5. WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan - Summary of Evidence Relevant to the Northern Ireland Skills Strategy :

An overview of the relevant sections of the WPG FRP will now be provided. Please note, figure numbers correspond with the order they are given in the FRP. The full WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan(s), as well as summary briefings, articles, departmental bespoke reports (including a bespoke report for the Department for Economy which was submitted in early 2021), webinars and more can be found [here](#). A wide range of experts have been involved in this work over the past 18 months and we would highly recommend that the Department acknowledges, engages with and incorporates the various economic recommendations made into future work.

### **Economic Justice Pillar:**

## 5.1 Women's Employment and Gender Pay Gap Reporting

### 5.1.1 Women's Employment in Northern Ireland

"Despite some progress made over the last few decades in increasing women's labour force participation and narrowing gender gaps in wages, gender equality in the world of work still remains an elusive goal"  
- International Labour Organisation (ILO).

'When women do better, economies do better.' - Christine Lagarde,  
former Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

### **Background**

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 men<sup>5</sup>. Having dependent children

---

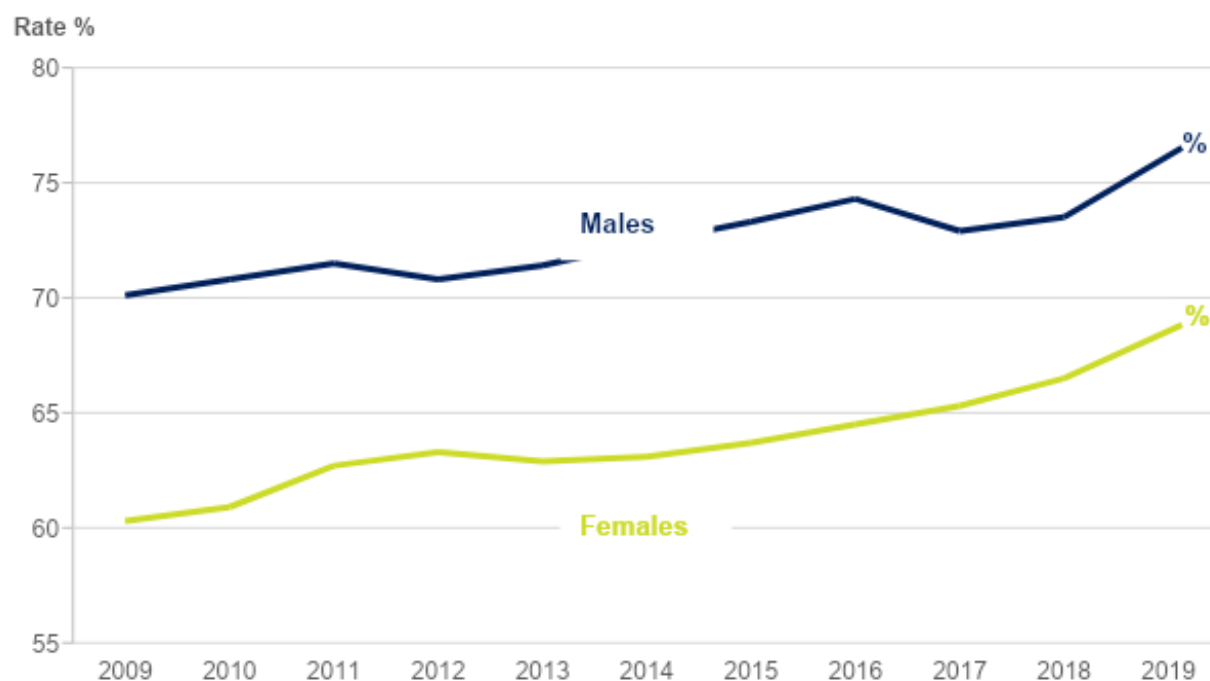
<sup>5</sup> See PWC (2020): <https://pwc.to/3xYZXsT>

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, while women are more prevalent in public administration, education and health.

Policy failures around family leave frameworks fail all workers, but disproportionately impacts 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.

In the last 10 years both the male and female employment rates have increased to all-time highs. During this time the female employment rate has consistently been lower than the rate for males, although the gap between the male and female rates has narrowed by 2 percentage points over ten years. The increase in the female employment rate is consistent with the change in pension age, as the employment rate for women aged 60-64 in employment has increased by 26pps over the last decade.

Figure 11: Employment rate by gender (16-64), Jan-Dec 2009 to Jan-Dec 2019



Source: NISRA Women in Northern Ireland 2020<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See NISRA (2020): <https://bit.ly/2UqVHnf>

### 5.1.2 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 pay<sup>7</sup>.

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 vital services necessary to keep others alive, such as our food and energy supply and our health service (as well as other crucial public services). The crisis has shown 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.

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 (ICTU) has identified workers in food manufacturing, residential care, and workplace cleaning as being especially vulnerable to low pay<sup>8</sup>, with women in those sectors particularly vulnerable. 62% of women working in food manufacturing earn below the Real Living Wage<sup>9</sup>, 55% of women in residential care earn below the RLW, and it is estimated that around 60% of women working as office cleaners earn below the RLW.

---

<sup>7</sup> See NERI Research Brief 'Low Pay in NI' (2019): <https://bit.ly/3xZ09bB>

<sup>8</sup> See ICTU 'No Going Back' (2020): <https://bit.ly/3h1Uwm5>

<sup>9</sup> See NERI Research Brief 'Low Pay in NI' (2019): <https://bit.ly/3xZ09bB>



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.

### 5.1.3 The Gender Pay Gap and Pay Inequalities

There is a pervasive public narrative that there is no issue with a gender pay gap in Northern Ireland. This is not only unhelpful, but also untrue. Recent research undertaken by NERI shows that the picture is, in fact, considerably more complicated and also shows that women continue to earn less than men across most employment sectors<sup>10</sup>.

If we compare the hourly earnings of all males and all females using median hourly pay, we can see that women earn 8.1% less per hour than men. However, as Dr Lisa Wilson from NERI points out in her paper, merely looking at one measurement hides a much more complex picture.

For example, when we compare the earnings of part-time female workers to full-time male workers, we see a gap of over 26% in median hourly earnings. This measure is important because it captures the part time pay penalty - both the fact that part time work is more likely to be lower paid and also that more women are more likely to work part time.

Dr Wilson also points us to considering the size of the gender pay gap based on longer time periods. Estimates of the gender pay gap based on weekly, monthly or annual earnings are often much larger than estimates based on hourly earnings. The rationale for basing the gender pay gap on these longer time periods is that we get closer to understanding the true reality of gendered differences in the economic returns for paid work for males and females.

The part-time effect is further illustrated by assessing the gender pay gap in terms of the gap in gross weekly and gross annual earnings between men and women. When assessed on a weekly basis, NERI calculates that median female hourly earnings were 29.5% less than men per week/per year.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> See: NERI Report Series 'The Gender Pay Gap in Northern Ireland' (2021): <https://bit.ly/3jbZjUJ>

<sup>11</sup> NERI Working Paper Series, 'How Unequal? The Under Adjusted Gender Pay Gap in Earnings in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland' (November 2020): <https://bit.ly/3j5u5hP>

The latest NISRA Bulletin on the Gender Pay Gap<sup>12</sup> also provides useful analysis to explore the gender pay gap in Northern Ireland. Whilst it reports a key finding that in 2020, full-time females in NI earned at least as much as full-time males on average, it also concludes that considering all employees, regardless of working pattern, female hourly pay is still below male pay on average due to the higher proportion of female part-time employees.

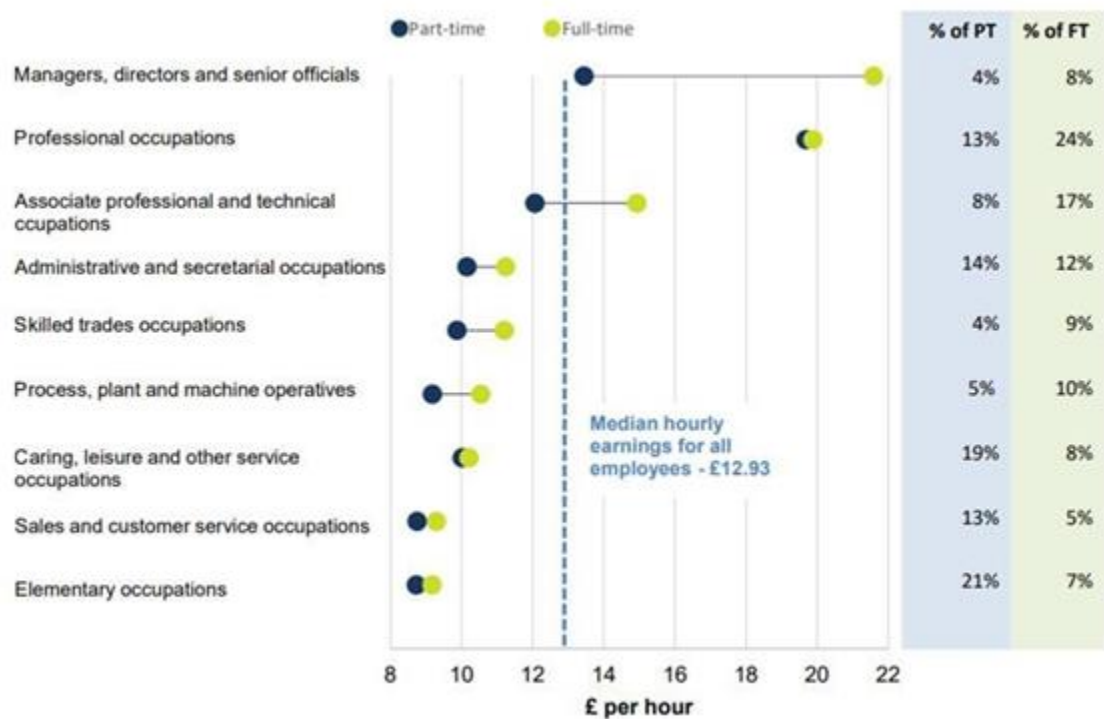
Figure 12: Median gross hourly earnings excluding overtime by gender in NI, April 2020



Source: NISRA: NI-ASHE-BULLETIN 2020-3 Gender Pay Gap

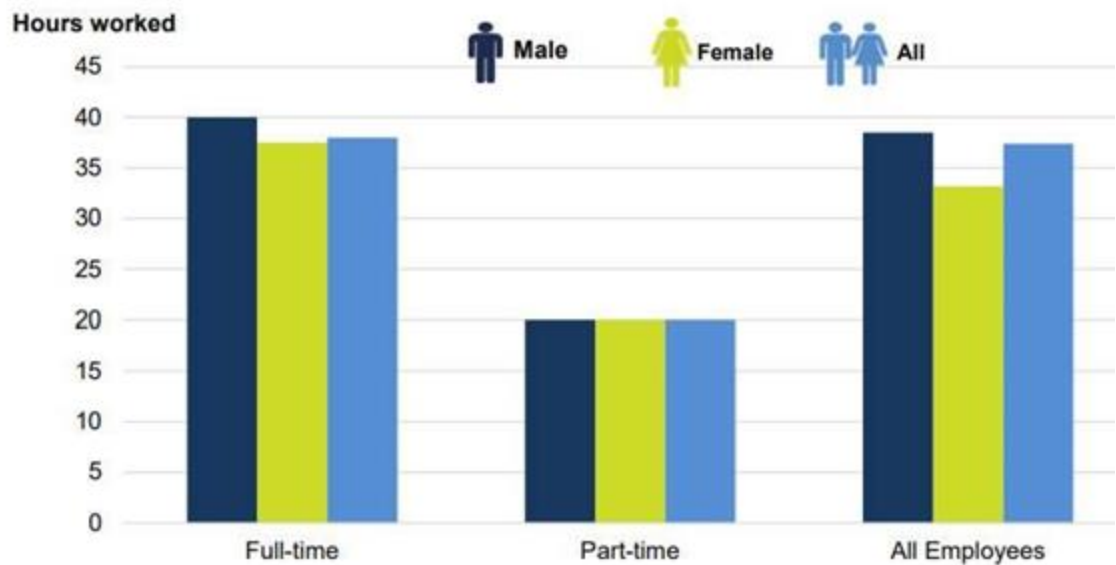
<sup>12</sup> NI ASHE Bulletin 2020-3: <https://bit.ly/3zPwNxY>

Figure 13: Median gross hourly earnings excluding overtime by working pattern and Occupation in NI, April 2020



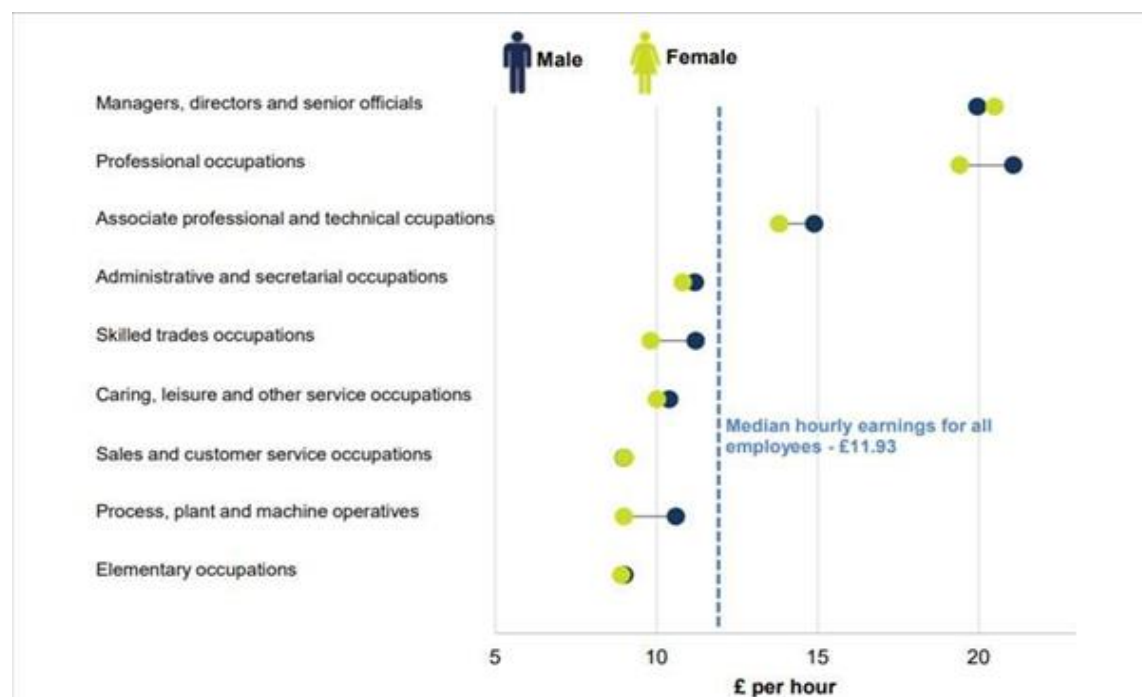
Source: NISRA: NI-ASHE-BULLETIN 2020-3 Gender Pay Gap

Figure 14: Median weekly paid hours worked by working pattern and gender, NI, April 2020



Source: NISRA: NI-ASHE-BULLETIN 2020-3 Gender Pay Gap

Figure 15: Median gross hourly earnings excluding overtime for all employees in NI by occupation and gender, April 2020



Source: NISRA: NI-ASHE-BULLETIN 2020-3 Gender Pay Gap

### 5.1.3.1 Gender Pay Gap Reporting Legislation

The European Trade Union Confederation estimates that if women were paid the same as men, the poverty rate among working women could be halved and 2.5 million children would come out of poverty.

The WPG is extremely concerned that Gender Pay Gap reporting legislation and associated measures, which were promised in the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, are still to be delivered and implemented; despite a commitment to introduce regulations, there is still no clear timetable some five years after the introduction.

The WPG would urge the swift introduction of reporting regulations and would further recommend that measures outlined in the original schedule are included. These include financial penalties for employers who flout the law as well as a requirement to report on pay gaps on the grounds of disability and race.

GPG reporting legislation is important but will not, in itself, solve pay inequality. This is why it is vital that the legislation is accompanied by a comprehensive strategy and resourced action plan. The WPG notes the intention to include the GPG strategy and action plan as part of the Gender Equality Strategy; whilst it is accepted that this is a way to avoid further delays, the inclusion of a strategy to address pay inequality within an overall GE strategy must not mean that a strategy and action plan to tackle gender pay inequality is watered down or lost within a larger piece of work. The GPG strategy must be comprehensive and must include a focused and resourced action plan, it should also consider the issue of gender pay transparency.

This is particularly important in the context of Brexit which will mean that important European Directives may not apply in Northern Ireland. Despite the commitment to no diminution of rights, safeguards, and equality of opportunity in Northern Ireland and the 'keeping pace' commitments in article 2 of the Northern Ireland Protocol, we are already seeing divergence in the equality infrastructure. Keeping pace applies to a narrow range of existing Directives and will not apply to important new Directives such as the Work Life Balance Directive and the upcoming Gender Pay Transparency Directive<sup>13</sup>.

Whilst the draft Gender Pay Transparency Directive falls short of key demands called for by trade unions, it still promises progressive steps towards pay equality; it is therefore extremely worrying that this Directive will not apply to Northern Ireland and more important than ever that the Northern Ireland Assembly exercise its devolved powers and legislate to ensure that steps are taken to eradicate gender pay inequality.

### Recommendations for Gender Pay Gap Reporting legislation:

- Include financial penalties for employers who flout the law by failing to report.
- Require employers to provide a narrative as to how the gender pay gap has arisen and an action plan as to how they are going to tackle it.
- Require reporting for all employers of 10 or more employees.
- Require reporting on pay gaps on grounds of disability and race.
- Ban pay secrecy clauses in contracts so that workers can discuss pay.
- Require information for job evaluation for the purpose of establishing equal pay for equal work.
- Make all employers produce pay information (audits) and annual action plans on pay equality.
- Support unions to negotiate with employers to tackle the pay gap.
- Require job advertisements to include the pay scale.

---

<sup>13</sup> UK Government Guidance Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland: Article 2:  
<https://bit.ly/3zSA9QQ>

- Prevent employers hiding behind privacy, data protection or administrative burden to avoid pay transparency.
- Ensure transparency for the whole pay package including benefits, bonuses, pensions, allowances etc.
- Impose sanctions on employers who do not take action.

#### 5.1.4 The Motherhood Penalty

Pay inequalities are further amplified when women have dependent children. An NIC ICTU policy document *Childcare in Northern Ireland: Care, Cost and Gender Equality*<sup>14</sup> found that women with dependent children are overrepresented 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 employed in permanent, full-time employment appears to be driven almost entirely by the much higher likelihood of women with children working 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 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.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, (n28).

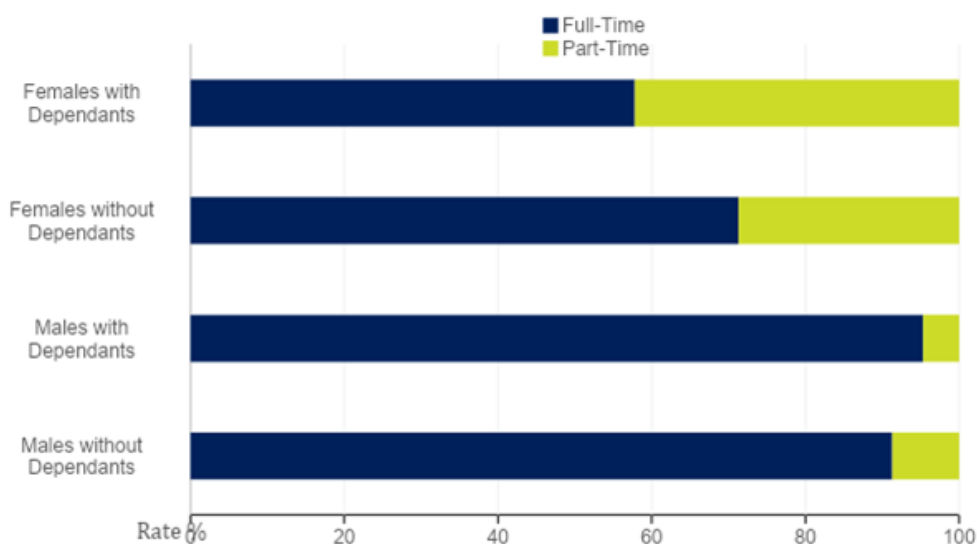
The latest Women in Northern Ireland report prepared by NISRA also details the differences in employment patterns experienced by men and women with dependent children.

Key findings include:

- 76% of women with dependent children were economically active, compared with 92% of men with dependent children.
- The economic activity rate for women with preschool age children (74%) was substantially lower than for men with preschool age children (93%).

The following graph also shows the differential impact having dependent children has on the working patterns of men and women, with women much more likely than men to be working part-time schedules, regardless of whether they have dependent children.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 16: Working patterns of men and women (16-64) with and without dependent children, October-December 2019.



Source: NISRA Women in Northern Ireland Report 2020

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, (n28).

### 5.1.5 Family Leave Frameworks

The Women's Policy Group has long argued that tinkering around the edges of policy will fail to solve persistent gender inequalities. Instead, what is needed is a comprehensive strategy to systematically tackle these issues, including a women's employment strategy, which considers all of the issues that hold women back in work and in society. Part of this consideration must focus on the system of support for working parents and carers. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown into stark relief the totally inadequate childcare support system in Northern Ireland, a system which sees childcare as an individual responsibility rather than a public good.

The pandemic has also shown the urgent requirement to overhaul the legislative framework for flexible working and family leaves including paternity and parental leave.

However, encouraging fathers/partners take up parental leave and having better access to flexible working is just one side of the story. The importance of factors that retain women's attachment to the labour market and give them access to quality jobs and progression once they become mothers must also be recognised, as maintaining employment opportunities for women through childbirth and early motherhood will increase the demand for more shared parenting within the home. Well-paid maternity leave is one of those factors.

Women are more likely to return to work with the same employer where there is a good period of well-paid leave, as evidenced by companies like Ford and BT who report returner rates of well over 90% as a result of their occupational maternity pay policies. A DWP study of maternity rights found that mothers who received occupational maternity pay were significantly more likely to return to their pre-birth employer than those who received no maternity pay (93% versus 63%).<sup>16</sup>

If women are able to take maternity leave and resume their previous jobs when they feel ready, this will be better for gender equality at work and will increase pressure for greater equality within the home. This scenario is much better than the alternative, i.e. women returning to work for financial reasons before they are truly ready to do so and then potentially dropping out of the labour market altogether or switching to a lower level job with less responsibility. It is therefore important for the government to recognise how well-paid maternity leave, paid at an earnings-related rate, has a role

---

<sup>16</sup> Ivana La Valle, Elizabeth Clery & Mari Carmen Huerta, 'Maternity rights and mothers' employer decisions, (DWP 2008)



to play in creating demand for more shared parenting and caring, including promoting gender equality.

#### Recommendation:

- Maternity pay should be paid at earnings related rate and both maternity leave and earnings-related pay should be available with eligibility restrictions removed.

### 5.1.6 Flexible Working

Whilst anyone can request flexible working, the law only grants the statutory right to request flexible work patterns to some employees. To be eligible, you must be employed by the same employer for 26 consecutive weeks. Clearly, this disadvantages vulnerable and low paid workers, who often work in low or zero hour contracts and who may be in most need of flexibility in work patterns. Evidence also indicates that many flexible leave requests are turned down by employers, despite the positive duty placed on them to seriously consider requests.

Flexible working rights should be available to all workers, regardless of employment status and that the rights should be available from day one. However, we also believe that the right needs to be strengthened – merely having a right to request flexible working does not go far enough. Polling from the TUC indicates that as many as one in three requests for flexible working are turned down by employers<sup>17</sup>[1]. We recommend that there should be a duty on employers to publish flexible working options in job adverts and give workers the right to take up the advertised flexibility from day one. If employers feel that a role cannot accommodate any form of flexibility, they should be required to transparently set out the exceptional circumstances that justify this. These measures would also go some way to addressing potential discrimination against applicants, many of whom are women, who have to ask about flexible working options at interview. Introducing a duty on employers to make flexible working the default would mean that applicants would be able to take this into consideration without fear of being singled out.

#### Recommendations:

---

<sup>17</sup> See more: TUC 'One in Three Flexible Working Requests Turned Down' (2020): <https://bit.ly/3xJzP4N>

- A change in the law so that employers must publish flexible working options in job adverts or justify why the job can't be done flexibly.
- A right for successful candidates to take up the advertised flexibility from day one.
- All workers to get the right to request flexible working at any stage in their employment.
- Introduce a formal "right to return" to the original working pattern at the end of an agreed period where the flexible working arrangements are limited in duration, and a right to request to return to the original pattern earlier in the event of a change of circumstances.
- An appeal process should be introduced that allows individuals and their trade union to scrutinise and challenge the reasons given for rejecting a request.

### 5.1.7 Parental Leave

There is also an eligibility requirement with parental leave, which again disadvantages vulnerable workers; the WPG recommends that parental leave should be available to all workers, regardless of their employment status and should be available as a day one right.

The other hugely significant issue is the fact that parental leave is unpaid. The evidence strongly shows that uptake of parental leave among fathers and second parents is shown to be much higher when the leave is paid at a rate which families can afford to live on, and without financial penalty, as is recommended by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and endorsed by the WPG. Furthermore, parental leave should be an individual and non-transferable right – that is, it cannot be transferred to the baby's mother.

Unpaid parental leave entitlement has a number of serious consequences – clearly many families will be unable to take the financial hit of taking unpaid leave so may therefore be forced to use a combination of paid holidays (which should instead be used as crucial down time) or to rely on family members where available. Sometimes a parent may even be forced to leave work entirely. Being either ineligible for parental leave or unable to take it because of financial constraints impacts disproportionately on single parents, the majority of whom are women. It also serves to reinforce gender stereotypes. As women are still more likely to earn less than a male partner, women will be more likely to take unpaid parental leave as families try to preserve a higher income. If a portion of leave isn't specifically designated for fathers/second parents and remunerated at a rate that they and their families can afford to live on, few men

will take it, placing the responsibility for caregiving overwhelmingly on women and thereby reinforcing inequalities at home and at work.

Shared Parental Leave (SPL) was introduced to encourage more fathers to take leave to care for their children. Whilst this may have benefitted some families, in the absence of other measures, it has not resulted in a large uptake of fathers taking leave to care for their children. The practical outworkings of the scheme are complicated and inflexible, and many couples are not eligible. Added to this, for many families, availing of shared parental leave means an income cut as men are still the main breadwinner in many households.

The WPG has attempted to access data to assess the numbers of families who have availed of SPL in Northern Ireland, unfortunately it has not been possible to get this information. However, evidence from GB indicates that the percentage of families using SPL is tiny. Given that there is no reason to assume that the position will be any different in Northern Ireland, the WPG concludes that Shared parental Leave is a failed policy and needs to be urgently overhauled.

#### Recommendations:

- Parental leave should be available for all workers and should be a day one right.
- A period of parental leave should be paid at 90% of AWE and the remainder at least the Real Living Wage (RLW).
- Parental leave should be non-transferable.

### 5.1.8 Paternity Leave

Not all workers are eligible to take paternity leave and the low rate of pay means that many fathers and new parents are unable to take this much needed time off to be with their partner and new baby. Two weeks is also not enough time at such an important juncture for all of the family.

The WPG recommends a period of mandatory paternity leave for fathers and second parents, who will only be able to take this period of leave if it is remunerated fairly. Remuneration should be in line with Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) and paid at 90% of average weekly earnings (AWE), without a cap, to ensure families do not incur a major financial penalty and to meet the objective of increasing paternal involvement in the early years.

This mandatory period of leave should be considered as separate and distinct to a parent's right to leave. The purpose of this mandatory leave would be to provide support to their partner and for the father/partner to bond with and care for their baby.

Whilst we have recommended rates of pay of 90% of AWE, we would suggest that this should be the minimum and should be with a clear objective of progressing to a system of maternity, paternity and parental leave which does not impose a pay penalty.

### Recommendations:

- Mandatory six-week paternity leave entitlement.
- Remunerated at 90% of AWE, without cap.
- Apply to all workers as a day one right, regardless of employment status.
- Data should be gathered and published on an annual basis. The data should include:
  - The number of flexible leave requests made, the number granted, the number refused and the reason for the refusal,
  - The number of shared parental leave requests made and granted or refused.

## 5.1.9 Sex Discrimination

Sex discrimination in the workplace continues to be a shockingly common occurrence. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland estimates that around 25% of the queries they get to their legal helpline relate to potential sex discrimination at work. Of these, they estimate that 21.5% are to do with pregnancy or maternity<sup>18</sup>. The issues raised are not confined to any particular sector and it is happening regardless of the level, type or grade of job held by women.

A survey conducted by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in 2019 found shockingly high levels of sexual harassment at work. ICTU surveyed more than 600 trade union members in Northern Ireland with experience of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the workplace and in line with international evidence, found that women were more likely to be victims of sexual harassment and men perpetrators. The survey

---

<sup>18</sup> CNI (2019), 'Pregnancy and Maternity Discrimination Remains an Issue for Working Mothers', Equality Commission NI, (available online): <https://bit.ly/3A1f6vw>

also found that 75% of workers experiencing sexual harassment at work did not report the incident to their employer while of those who did report, 62% felt that it was not dealt with satisfactorily and in some instances reported that they had been treated less favourably as a result of reporting sexual harassment<sup>19</sup>.

In June 2019, at the Centenary Conference of the International Labour Organization (ILO)<sup>20</sup>, the Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) and its accompanying Recommendation (No. 206) were adopted. The global community has made it clear that violence and harassment in the world of work will not be tolerated and must end.

These landmark instruments were developed by the key world of work actors (representatives of governments, employers and workers), and set out a common framework to prevent and address violence and harassment, based on an inclusive, integrated and gender-responsive approach. The Convention and the Recommendation also refer to domestic violence and its impact in the world of work.

The Preamble to the Convention notes that “domestic violence can affect employment, productivity and health and safety, and that governments, employers’ and workers’ organizations and labour market institutions can help, as part of other measures, to recognize, respond to and address the impacts of domestic violence”. As such, the Convention requires Members to “take appropriate measures to ... recognize the effects of domestic violence and, so far as is reasonably practicable, mitigate its impact in the world of work” (Art. 10(f)), and the Recommendation provides further guidance.

The inclusion of provisions regarding domestic violence in Convention No. 190 and Recommendation No. 206 reflects a fundamental change: historically, domestic violence was relegated as a “private” issue, with no connection to work, and it is now being acknowledged as having real consequences for workers, enterprises and the society at large.

The new instruments finally recognise the negative spillover effects that domestic violence can have on the world of work and the positive contribution that work can make towards improving the well-being of victims of domestic violence.

---

<sup>19</sup> ICTU (2019), ‘NIC-ICTU survey reveals shockingly high levels of under-reporting of sexual harassment at work’, ICTU, (available online): <https://bit.ly/2UuqUGi>

<sup>20</sup> ILO, ‘Eliminating Violence and Harassment in the World of Work’, (available online): <https://bit.ly/3d8JsSZ>

## 5.1.10 Trade Union Membership and Collective Bargaining

Recent research from the Nevin Economic Research Institute shows that 53% of employees in Northern Ireland have a trade union that bargains for pay in their workplace; 58% of women are employed in covered workplaces compared to only 42% of men employees, that women employees are more likely to be in covered workplaces is largely driven by the much larger proportion of women workers employed in the public sector<sup>21</sup>.

NERI also finds that employees covered by collective agreements are likely to earn up to 13% more than similar workers who negotiate pay individually. The persistence of this union premium shows that despite lower trade union density, collective bargaining still delivers for workers in Northern Ireland.

For employers, there is also ample evidence of a connection between collective bargaining and higher productivity. Being a member of a trade union which bargains collectively on pay and terms and conditions brings a premium not only for the employee but also for the employer and is particularly important for women.

### Recommendations:

- Develop a women's employment strategy which identifies the labour market issues facing women and an associated cross departmental action plan to tackle these.
- Introduce Gender Pay Gap Reporting legislation which is fit for purpose for Northern Ireland. The legislation should recognise that SMEs and micro businesses form the majority of employers in Northern Ireland and the reporting threshold should be set to reflect this. Furthermore, employers should be required to produce a narrative detailing why a gender pay gap exists and an action plan to lay out how it will be tackled. Any agency tasked with enforcement must be properly resourced. Any legislation must be accompanied by an associated strategy, action plan and accountability measures which should be properly resourced.
- Introduce gender transparency measures to tackle inequality in men's and women's pay and pensions.

---

<sup>21</sup> NERI 'The Impact of Collective Bargaining on Pay in Northern Ireland' (May, 2020): <https://bit.ly/2SYeKoD>

- Review flexible working legislation and make this available as a day one right for all workers. Place positive duties on employers which make flexible working the default position.
- Review maternity leave and pay, remove eligibility requirements and ensure that maternity pay is paid at earnings related rates for all.
- Make parental leave available as a day one right, introduce paid parental leave.
- Introduce 6 weeks of paternity leave, remunerated at least to 90% of average weekly earnings
- Introduce a duty on employers to proactively tackle sexual harassment at work to include mandatory training for all employees including managers and HR personnel.
- The Northern Ireland Executive should recognise and promote the importance of collective bargaining and trade unions as a driver for workplace equality, better pay and terms and conditions as well as higher productivity.

## 5.2 Gender Segregated Labour Markets and Care Work

The World Economic Forum states that gender segregated labour markets and a lack of gender parity has a negative fundamental bearing on whether or not economies and societies thrive<sup>22</sup>. Gender segregated labour markets are an issue globally, and research shows that areas with higher levels of gender segregated labour markets not only lower innovation levels in professions which lack gender diversity, but also that this professional gender divergence has a compounding effect of gender pay gaps<sup>23</sup>.

Gender segregated labour markets do not just harm women, they harm society as a whole. Northern Ireland has become an increasingly attractive place for investment in technology thanks to a combination of factors including skills availability, excellent infrastructure, cost-effectiveness and a supportive business environment<sup>24</sup>. As Northern Ireland strives towards greater investment in technology ahead of any “fourth industrial revolution”, the ramifications of not urgently tackling occupational gender segregation are likely to stifle growth. This is of particular importance given

---

<sup>22</sup> World Economic Forum (2020), ‘Mind the 100 Year Gap’, Global Gender Gap Report 2020, <https://bit.ly/3d4itl2>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> See Invest NI, ‘Northern Ireland has proven technology experience, capacity and capability (2020): <https://bit.ly/3zKsaFr>

efforts to create greater innovation, skills and productivity in the Northern Ireland economy as we recover from COVID-19.

A Northern Ireland Assembly Review of Gender Issues released in 2019 found that there are significant levels of workforce horizontal segregation (occupational segregation) and vertical segregation (with women vastly overrepresented in lower-paid and less senior positions). Further, analysis of working patterns (full-time vs. part-time) also shows vast levels of segregation based on gender. These high levels of gender segregation in our labour markets are not explicable by the traditional notion that certain jobs are better suited to men (for example technology, construction, financial services and manufacturing) or women (childcare, administration, retail and hospitality), but due to long-standing policy failures surrounding family leave frameworks that fail all workers and disproportionately impact women.

As the global COVID-19 pandemic vastly disrupted labour markets and in moving towards recovery, it is necessary to understand how gender segregated labour markets and caring responsibilities have amplified these issues. This is crucial if recovery is to be evenly felt, particularly as data shows that the only sectors to have grown throughout 2020 have been ones with majority men workforces and women with dependents have been the hardest hit.

In analysing the types of labour segregation and why it exists, policy makers can develop robust recovery policies to address barriers to employment, increasing levels of underemployment, increasing levels of economic inactivity and the unequal distribution of care work as we recover from COVID-19. This chapter will follow the analyses of the economic impact of COVID-19, women's employment and gender pay gaps, and try to address some of the additional factors upholding gender segregated labour markets.

### 5.2.1 Industrial and Occupational Segregation

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 (as highlighted in section 1.2).



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<sup>25</sup>.

As women with caring responsibilities and women with children under the age of 12 have been shown to be the hardest hit by the pandemic globally, it is clear that action must be taken to understand and address the factors behind all forms of labour market segregation.

### 5.2.2 UK-wide and Global Data on Segregation and Care Work

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:

'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'<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup>. Pre-

---

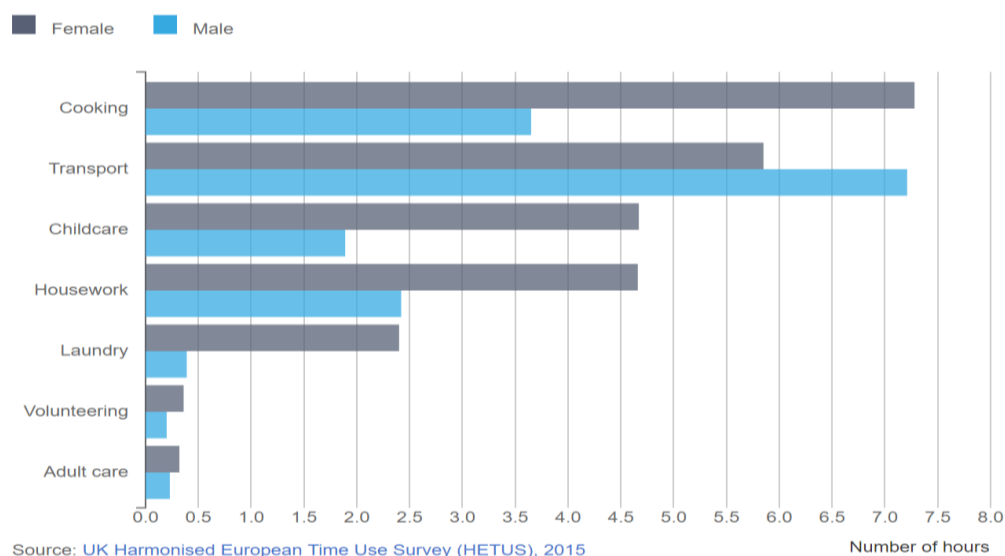
<sup>25</sup> ECNI, 'Delivering Equality Employment - Key Inequalities in Employment', (2018): <https://bit.ly/3d6L5jY>

<sup>26</sup> Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed and Ramya Subrahmanian, (April 2020), 'Caring in the time of COVID-19: Gender, unpaid care work and social protection', UNICEF: <https://uni.cf/2TRRUz8>.

<sup>27</sup> UN Women (2019), 'Families in a Changing World', Progress of the World's Women 2019-2020, p.15 <https://bit.ly/3xQTlg5>, p.15.

covid disparities in unpaid care work between men and women in the UK can also be seen in figure 17 overleaf<sup>28</sup>.

Figure 17: Unpaid Care Work Differentials for Men and Women in the UK



During the various lockdowns throughout 2020-2021, these responsibilities increased significantly as women 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 understood<sup>29</sup>.

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

<sup>28</sup> The only exception where men's responsibilities are greater than women is transport, in which this data includes transport to work for the individual.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, (n19).

comes to the economic and social fallout of the pandemic, women and girls face much greater risks<sup>30</sup>.

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 it<sup>31</sup>.

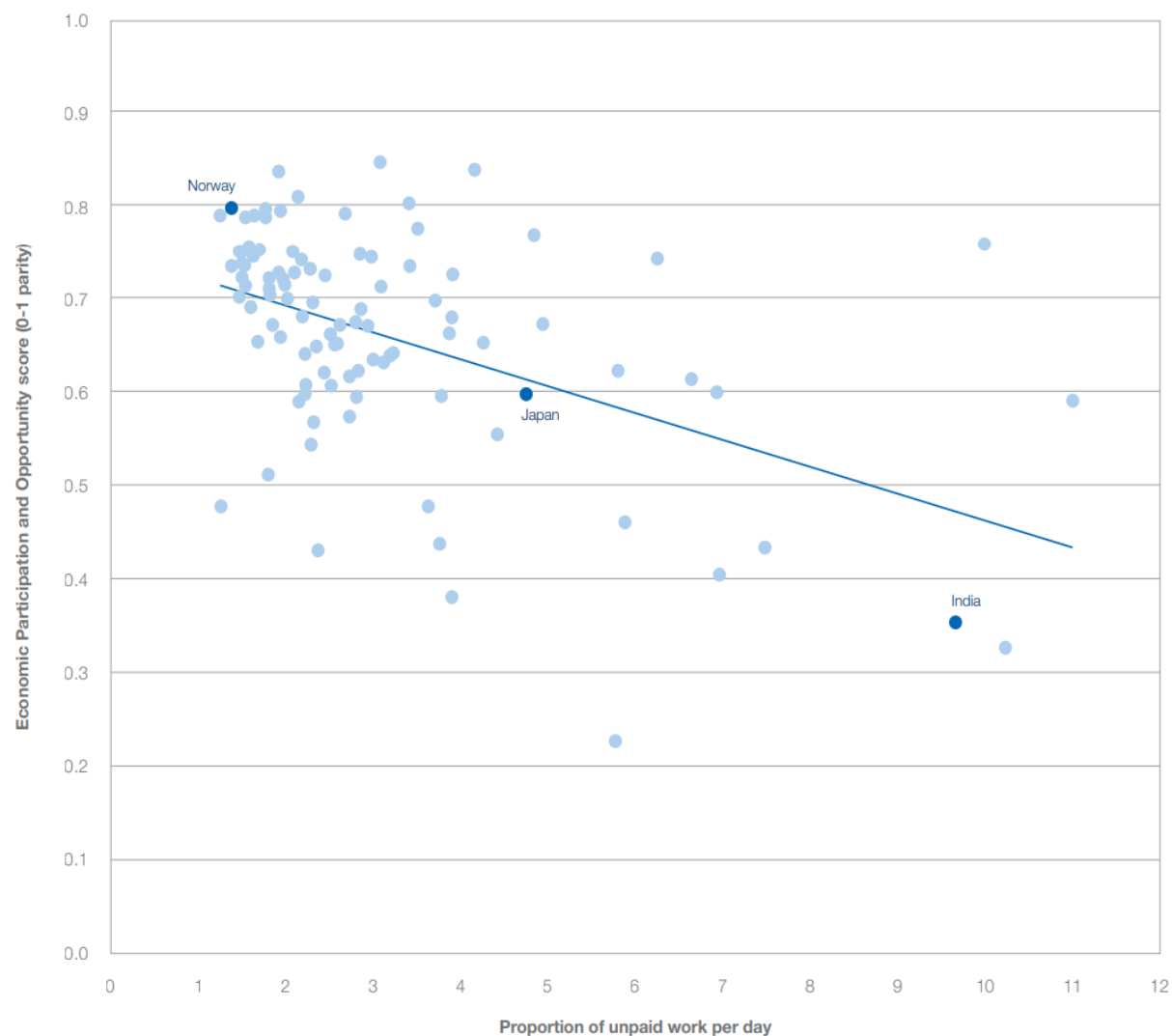
According to the World Economic Forum, strong correlations can be found between high levels of unpaid work per day and the inability to access economic participation and opportunity can be seen in figure 18 overleaf:

---

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> United Nations, (April 2020), 'Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women', UN Women, <https://bit.ly/3gXEHwy>.

Figure 18: WEF Correlation Data on Unpaid Work and Economic Opportunities

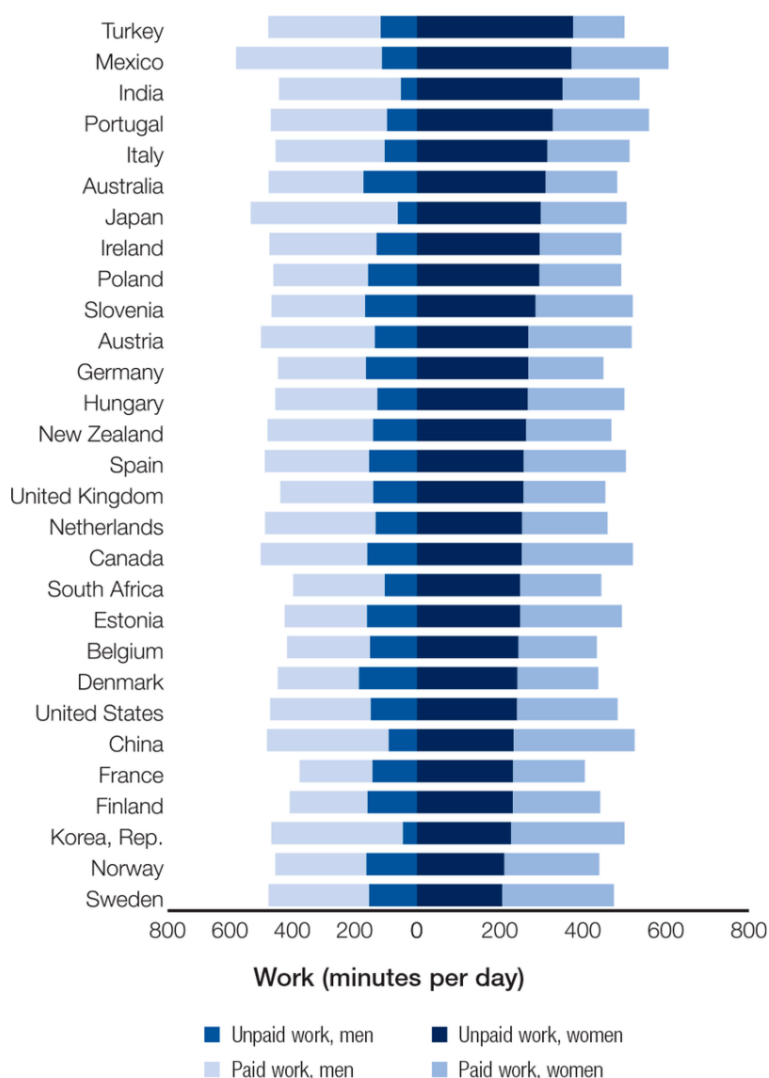


#### Sources

World Economic Forum and OECD, *Gender, Institutions and Development Database (GID-DB)*.

Further global comparisons, and where the UK and Ireland stand comparatively, of paid and unpaid work per day for men and women can be seen in figure 19 overleaf.

Figure 19: Paid and Unpaid Work (minutes per day) for men and women, by country: Source: OECD Social Protection and Wellbeing Database<sup>32</sup>



Significantly, 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. When looking at the UK gender gap in figure 19 below, the gender gap is still extremely prevalent and likely to worsen due to the economic impact of COVID-19. 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

<sup>32</sup> Found in: Ceri Parker, (2017), 'It's official: women work nearly an hour longer than men every day', World Economic Forum, <https://bit.ly/3j6E9aw>

capital development'<sup>33</sup>. Across the UK, 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. The under-representation of women in companies' board of directors can be seen in figure 21 overleaf and the gender segregation clusters across sectors can also be seen in figure 22 overleaf.

Figure 20: Global Gender Gap Index Ranking by Region 2020

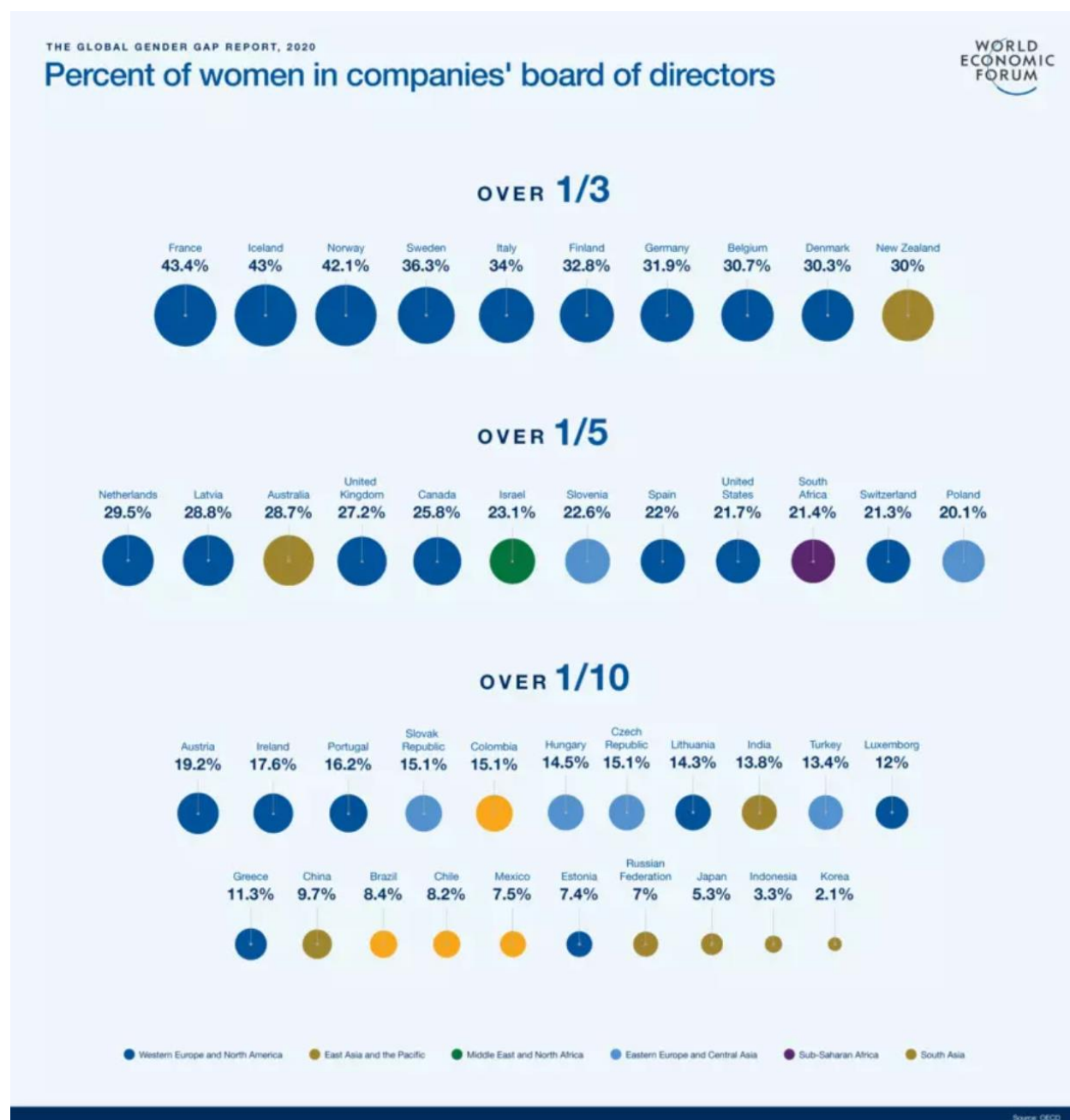
### Western Europe and North America

Country	Rank		Score
	Regional	Global	
Iceland	1	1	0.877
Norway	2	2	0.842
Finland	3	3	0.832
Sweden	4	4	0.820
Ireland	5	7	0.798
Spain	6	8	0.795
Germany	7	10	0.787
Denmark	8	14	0.782
France	9	15	0.781
Switzerland	10	18	0.779
Canada	11	19	0.772
United Kingdom	12	21	0.767
Belgium	13	27	0.750
Austria	14	34	0.744
Portugal	15	35	0.744
Netherlands	16	38	0.736
Luxembourg	17	51	0.725
United States	18	53	0.724
Italy	19	76	0.707
Greece	20	84	0.701
Malta	21	90	0.693
Cyprus	22	91	0.692

Source: World Economic Forum - Gender Gap Report 2020

<sup>33</sup> Ibid (n28), p.33.

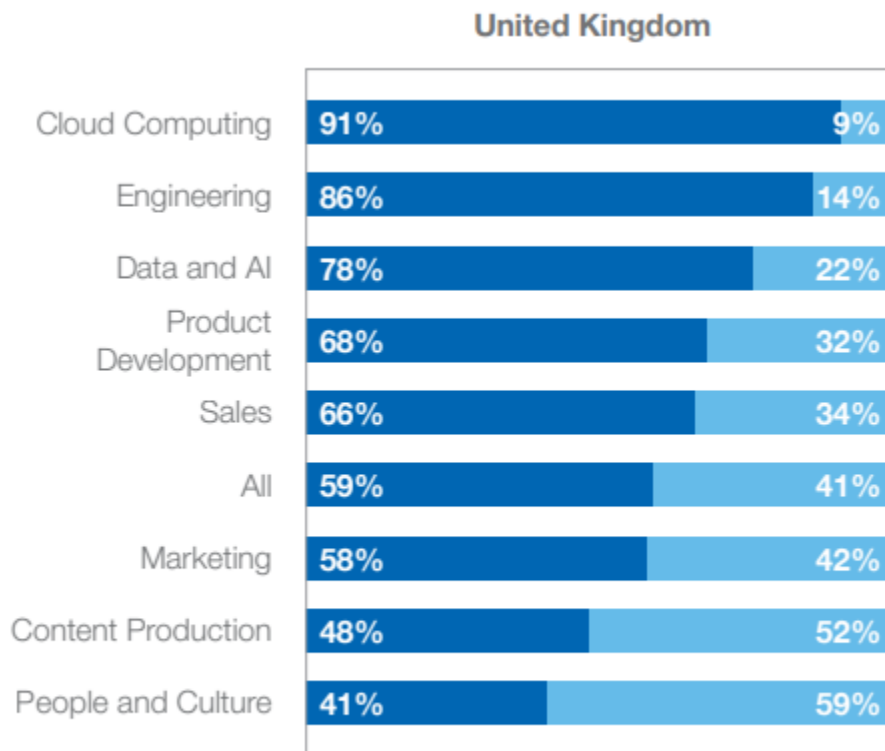
Figure 21: Representation of women in companies' board of directors globally



Source: OECD<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Found in: World Economic Forum, (2019), 'Mind the 100 Year Gap: None of us will see gender parity in our lifetimes, and nor likely will many of our children', World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report 2020, <https://bit.ly/3d4itl2>

Figure 22: Share of Men and Women by Professional Cluster UK

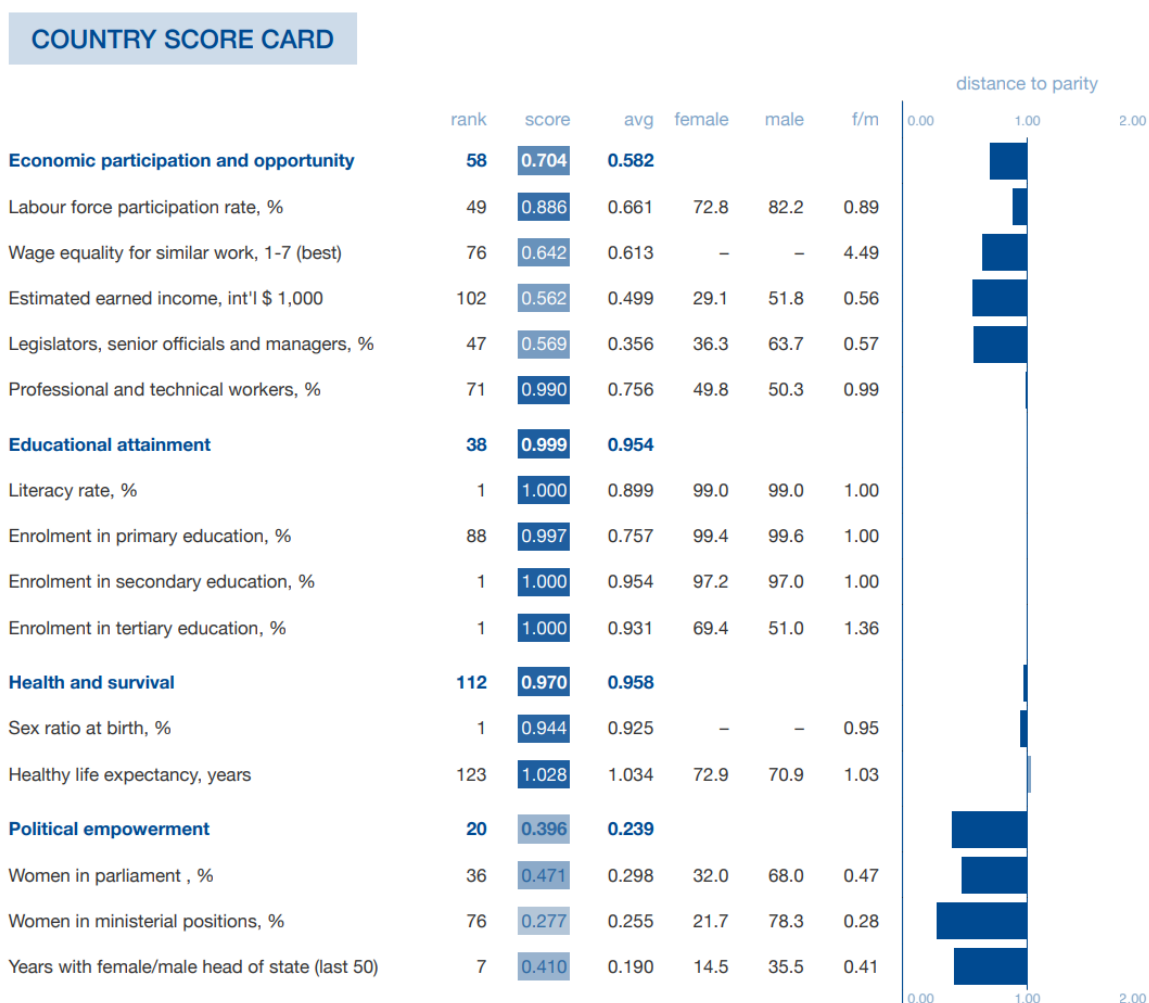


Source: World Economic Forum World Gender Gap Report 2020

Figure 23 overleaf 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.



Figure 23: World Economic Forum Gender Gap UK Score Card



Source: World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report April 2020, p.351<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> More information on how to analyse the UK score card can be found on p5.59-61 Of the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report April 2020: <https://bit.ly/3d4itl2>

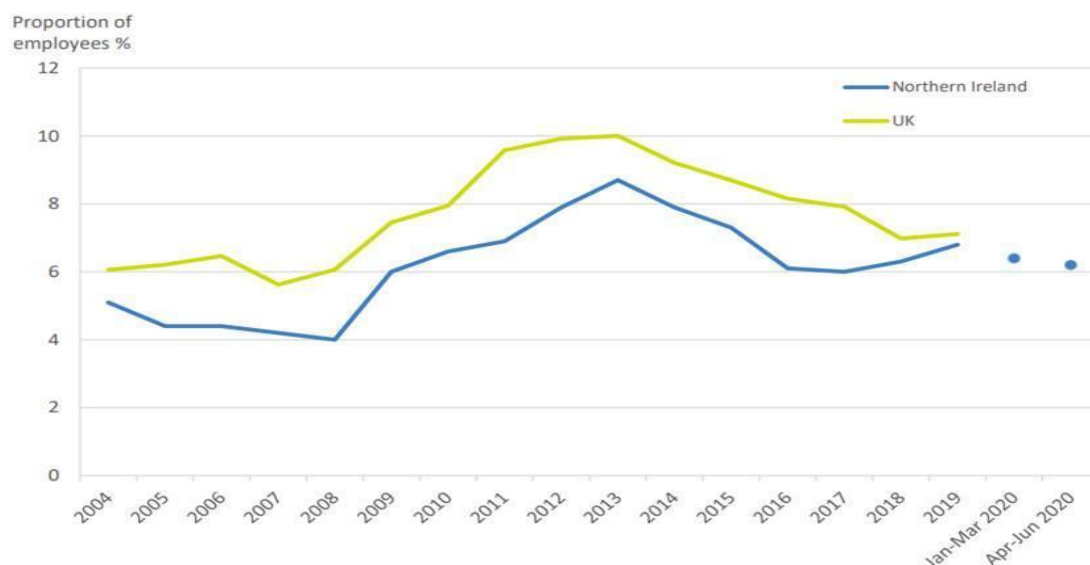
## 5.2.3 Northern Ireland Specific Data on Segregation and Care Work

### 1.3.3.1 Overview

When analysing gender segregated labour markets and the factors behind this, the issues are just as prevalent in Northern Ireland as elsewhere; particularly the unequal distribution of care work and the impact this has on women's ability to access the paid labour market, the sectors they work in and the working patterns they undertake.

Sections 1.1 and 1.2 provided detailed analyses of employment rates, unemployment rates, gender pay gap comparisons, the motherhood gap and the impact of having dependents on working patterns. This section will examine the sectors and horizontal/vertical levels of labour market segregation in Northern Ireland and some reasoning behind this. In doing so, the WPG hopes that policymakers can have a greater understanding of the urgent need to address systemic policy failures that are dramatically impacting women's labour market positioning; particularly as these issues have significantly worsened due to COVID-19. In failing to recognise these issues, which fall outside of traditional measurements of levels of employment and unemployment, within the Northern Ireland economy, any economic recovery will be uneven and will further embed inequalities in our society.

Figure 24: Underemployed in Northern Ireland

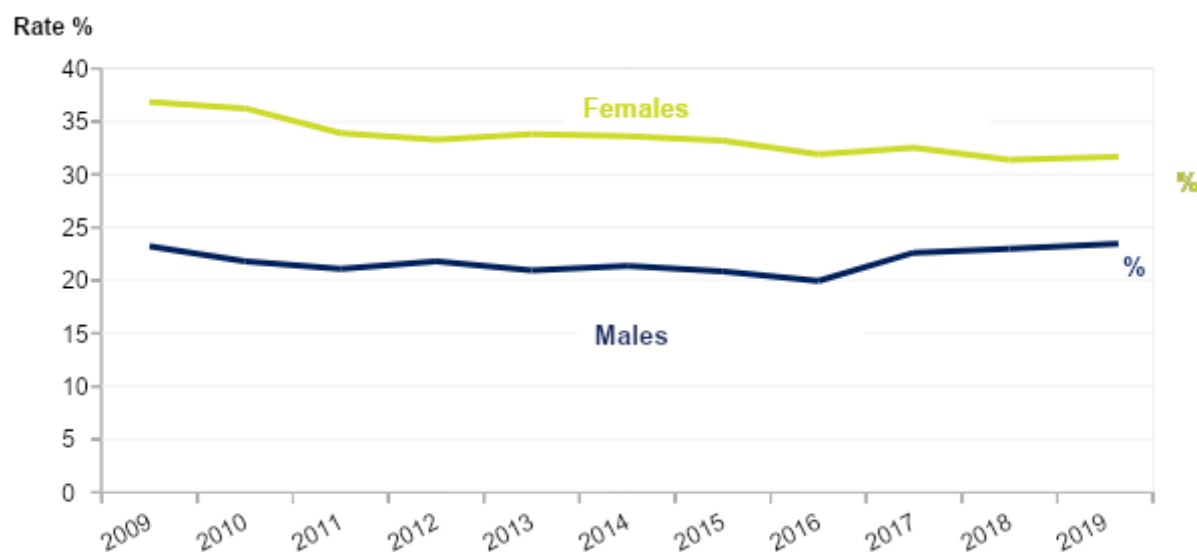


Source: NIRSA - Underemployment in Northern Ireland Topic Paper 2020

As stated in section 1.1, growing levels of underemployment are of great concern in Northern Ireland. Figure 24 shows levels of underemployment from 2004 until June 2020. This suggests that growing numbers of people are looking for additional work and hours but cannot find them. With the increased claimant count in Northern Ireland compared to pre-pandemic levels, this suggests that large numbers of people are either claiming because they cannot find work, or because their current earnings are low. Underemployment rates for women have consistently been higher than underemployment rates for men.

There are prevalent issues of women working in jobs and grades below their capability due to the lack of flexible working in the roles they are qualified to do, and this may be contributing to growing underemployment rates. Further, due to poor data collection in relation to trans communities, issues of trans discrimination in the workplace and underachievement due to truancy in education and how this impacts underemployment of gender minorities is not recognised or addressed.

Figure 25: Northern Ireland Economic Inactivity Rate by Gender

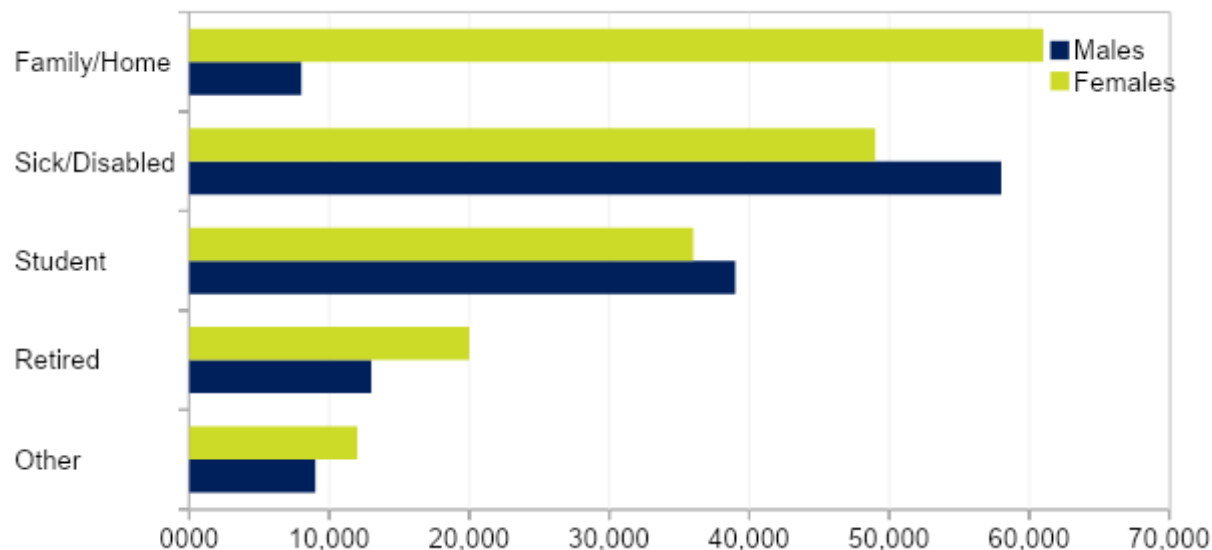


Source: NISRA - Women in Northern Ireland 2020

Another statistic not reflected in employment and unemployment rates is economic inactivity<sup>36</sup>.

Roughly 30% of all women aged 16-64 are considered economically inactive compared to 22% of men (figure 25 above); 34% (61,000 people) of these women are considered inactive due to family and home commitments. Conversely, looking after family and the home is the least common reason for male economic inactivity (8,000 people or 6%). The difference in inactivity rates between men and women can be entirely attributed to the difference in the number looking after the family/home (figure 26 overleaf). In fact, excluding the numbers looking after the family/home from the inactivity totals would bring the women's inactivity rate below that of males (19.9% for women and 20.7% for men)<sup>37</sup>.

Figure 26: Reasons for Economic Inactivity by Gender (16-64):



Source: NISRA - Women in Northern Ireland 2020

Economic inactivity rates for women in the 25-34 age range with dependent children are much higher (20pps) than for those without dependent children, the age group most likely to have infants, toddlers, and pre-school aged children. Further, women with dependent children are most likely to be employed between the ages of 35-49 years, within which age band approximately four-fifths of women are in the labour market (working or looking for work), and are much more likely to work part-time

<sup>36</sup> For a detailed analysis of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland, see Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report (March 2021): <https://bit.ly/3zSb1JJ>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid (n28)

hours than their male counterparts<sup>38</sup>. The economic activity rate for women with preschool age children (74%) was substantially lower than for men with preschool age children (93%). Over the past decade, women have consistently had lower economic activity than men regardless of age of youngest dependent child. The group with the lowest economic activity is women with a youngest child that is of preschool age (73.3%).

What is clear, and what women have always known, is that engagement and experiences with the labour market are largely gendered in Northern Ireland. Women have vastly different levels of uptake in employment, types of employment undertaken and sectors they work in, due to their age and whether they have young children. The inherently gendered nature of ability to engage with the labour market is not reflected as clearly on men as it is on women. The vertical and horizontal segregation of women in Northern Ireland is extremely prevalent, with societal attitudes to gender and caring responsibilities embedding this further.

The WPG would like to challenge the perception of “economic inactivity”, as many women are disproportionately left out of the labour market due to home and family commitments, gendered stereotypes and systemic barriers to the labour market. This is a large proportion of women that could access the labour market if adequate childcare provisions and social support were in place. This has been estimated of being equivalent to 56% of GDP for the UK, with unpaid childcare alone being equivalent to 18% of GDP and long-term care being equivalent to 3% of GDP<sup>39</sup>. The economic inactivity of young women with dependents particularly, should be seen as a priority as this is the least likely reason for men to become economically inactive and is a strong indicator of the levels of gender inequality that exist in Northern Ireland.

Finally, the WPG would like to endorse the following statement from the Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report 2021:

“The contributions of those in managing home and family commitments should not be considered to have no economic value; the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the essential nature of care work, and this should be valued. It is crucial to recognise the economic value of unpaid work and challenge terms such as “economic inactivity” as they perpetuate the undervaluing of women’s domestic work. This has been estimated of being equivalent to 56% of GDP for the UK, with unpaid childcare alone

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid (n28).

<sup>39</sup> ONS (2016). Changes in the value and division of unpaid care work in the UK: 2000 to 2015. <https://bit.ly/3iWAXv0>,

being equivalent to 18% of GDP and long-term care being equivalent to 3% of GDP...<sup>40</sup>

Finally, when looking at the causes of “economic inactivity”, it is crucial that an intersectional lens is applied to understand the reasons for this. For instance, there are also many issues with the treatment of and discrimination towards gender minorities in the workplace and in public-facing roles, coupled with broader issues in access to mental health support, housing and education, that needs to be examined to ensure that gender minorities are not forced into being what is considered “economically inactive”. In addition, inaccessibility and discrimination are huge barriers for disabled people accessing employment, and many become involuntarily “economically inactive” due to these societal barriers.<sup>41</sup>

### 1.3.3.2 Gender Segregated Labour Markets

According to NISRA, nearly half (48%) of employed women were employed within the “public administration, education and health” sector and a further fifth (19%) were employed within the “distribution, hotels and restaurants” sector. Employment across sectors was more evenly distributed for men, with “public administration, education and health” and “distribution, hotels and restaurants” being the two highest categories with 16% of employed men in each.

Further, in times of economic crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, gender segregated labour markets contribute to economic suffering disproportionately impacting women. For instance, in Northern Ireland, 79% of all Health and Social Care staff are women, 79% of all part-time workers are women, the majority of low-paid and precarious workers in retail and hospitality workers are women and 70% of workers ineligible for Statutory Sick Pay are women<sup>42</sup>. Failing to address the long-term issues with the levels of women in low-paid, insecure and part-time work, leads to women bearing the economic brunt of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Policy intervention is needed to address gender stereotypes and gender segregated labour markets in Northern Ireland, in a way that also recognises the diverse experiences of gender minorities.

---

<sup>40</sup> ONS (2016). Changes in the value and division of unpaid care work in the UK: 2000 to 2015. <https://bit.ly/3iWAXv0>.

<sup>41</sup> Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report (March 2021): <https://bit.ly/3zSb1JJ>

<sup>42</sup> See sections 1.1 and 1.2 for more information of the disproportionate economic impact of COVID-19 on women.

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 2020<sup>43</sup>:

- 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.

### 1.3.3.3 Unequal Distribution of Caring Responsibilities

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)<sup>44</sup>. Research from Carers NI shows that Northern Ireland's carers save the economy £4.6 billion per year<sup>45</sup>; whilst unpaid carers across all the UK provide social care worth £57

---

<sup>43</sup> 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): <https://bit.ly/3h1vC5Z>

<sup>44</sup> WRDA (February 2020), 'Gender Inequality in Northern Ireland: Where are we in 2020?', *Bold Women Blogging*, (available online): <https://bit.ly/3zS2WET>

<sup>45</sup> Carers NI (2015), 'NI Carers save government £4.6 billion a year', <https://bit.ly/3d88MbZ>; see also: Carers NI (2017) 'State of Caring 2017': <https://bit.ly/3j79KbO>.

billion per year<sup>46</sup>. 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 began<sup>47</sup>. 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<sup>48</sup>. 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.

Research from carers Week 2020 found that in Northern Ireland<sup>49</sup>:

- 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,

---

<sup>46</sup> Office for National Statistics (2017), 'Unpaid carers provide social care worth £57 billion' (2017): <https://bit.ly/35PpKYl>

<sup>47</sup> 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*, <https://bit.ly/3qiOrFQ> p.4.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, pp.27-28.



- 74% of NI respondents also believed that the government should increase support; for example, through increased financial support, investment in care and support services so unpaid carers can take a break and through further investment in social services.

More recent research from the Carers Week 2021 Report found that out of 2,850 carers surveyed in the UK<sup>50</sup>:

- 81% have had to provide more care during the pandemic,
- 63% are worried about continuing to care without a break,
- 74% are exhausted as a result of caring,
- 72% have not had any breaks throughout the pandemic,
- 71% are stressed and anxious as a result of caring,
- 35% feel unable to manage their caring role,
- 65% feel lonely and isolated,
- 55% felt overwhelmed by their caring role,
- Only 14% felt confident support will continue into the future,
- Carers lost 25 hours of support every month during the pandemic or 425 hours throughout the pandemic,
- 64% reported relying on family and friends to take a break,
- 21% chose not to take any breaks because they were worried about catching COVID-19,
- 66% of carers who did receive a break said they had not enough breaks to protect their health and wellbeing or had fewer breaks than before the pandemic,
- 33% used their breaks to complete practical tasks such as housework,
- 26% used any breaks they had to attend medical appointments,
- 25% used a break to catch up on sleep,
- 63% have not been able to look after their own health and wellbeing during the pandemic,
- 69% of carers said their mental health worsened during the pandemic,
- Women carers were more likely to say their mental health had been impacted (71%) compared to men carers (64%),
- 64% of carers said their physical health worsened during the pandemic,
- Women carers were more likely to say their physical health had been impacted (66%) compared to men carers (61%),
- 65% felt lonelier and more isolated than before the pandemic,
- 70% of parent carers reported being lonelier and more isolated,

---

<sup>50</sup> Carers Week Report 2021: <https://bit.ly/2SjxOgG>

- 49% of carers reported not being able to maintain their relationships and this rose to 55% for those who haven't had a break during the pandemic,
- 44% highlighted they were not getting enough support before the pandemic,
- Just 11% of carers said they were getting the same level of support they had before the pandemic,
- 28% of carers said they needed more support than before the pandemic.

Some of the Carers Week Report 2021 findings specific to Northern Ireland included:

- In Northern Ireland, many carers cited worries and uncertainty about Health and Social Care Trusts budgets and social care funding being cut after the pandemic,
- Before the pandemic, 44% of carers were unable to access the breaks they needed, and this increased to 79% of carers being unable to take a break.
- A further 11% have had fewer or insufficient breaks,
- Of the 28% able to take a break, 30% used breaks for their own medical appointments and 29% used their breaks for practical tasks such as housework,
- 72% of carers in NI say their mental health has worsened because of the lack of breaks,
- 67% said their physical health had deteriorated during the pandemic,
- 78% reposted feeling exhausted and worn out as a result of caring,
- 69% are worried about continuing care without a break,
- 33% feel unable to manage their caring role,
- Just 9% were confident that the support they relied on would continue in the future,
- 29% of carers reported needing more support than before the pandemic, either due to the needs of the person they care for increasing or due to their own health deteriorating.

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 and recovery planning. 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 lifetime earnings, a gendered lens is needed in addressing the segregation of care work to prevent further embedding gender inequality.

### Recommendations:

WPG recommendations to address gender segregation and the unequal distribution of care include:

- Action must be taken to acknowledge the many women who work in precarious, low-paid jobs that are unable to stay at home due to employer reluctance to furlough these workers; particularly as many of these women do not have trade union representation nor can they benefit from collective bargaining.
- In addition to this, action needs to be taken to address how difficult it is for women to complete all aspects of work from home when trying to manage their workloads, childcare and providing education from home.
- Measures should be introduced to prevent employees from being penalised.
- Monitoring gender parity in the professions of the future provides a critical opportunity to guide the emerging labour market to more equitable outcomes in the future of work.
- Urgently increase the supply and visibility of women with disruptive technical skills.
- To ensure that the professions of the future can target gender parity within the coming decade, reskilling and upskilling efforts for women interested in expanding their skills range should be focused on those already in the labour market or looking to re-enter the labour market after a period of inactivity.
- Build on existing good practice evidenced in alteration of policy on Maternity Allowance for women furloughed due to COVID-19.
- Promote conciliation measures and actions finalised to increase equal opportunities in both education and work<sup>51</sup>. Family policies, social protection systems and measures finalised to reduce gender inequalities, encouraging higher education and job opportunities for women are some measures that can be taken.
- Analyse the economic value of putting money into caring, which may help carers get back into paid employment and thus improve their health and financial wellbeing and consequently reducing pressure on the health and benefits systems in the long-run.
- For a better, more resilient economy, it is essential that we value and recognise care work. It needs to be a valued job that is paid well, attracts investment in education and training, provides opportunities for promotion and is seen as a valued career.
- Require all workplaces to record and publish gender segregation and gender pay gap data.

---

<sup>51</sup> Rosalia Castellane et. al. (2019), 'Analyzing the gender gap in European labour markets at the NUTS-1 level', *Cogent Social Sciences* Vol 5. 2019 Iss. 1., <https://bit.ly/2SjH18M>

The WPG also supports the below medium-term and longer-term recommendations from the UK Women's Budget Group<sup>52</sup>:

- Require employers to report the numbers of people made redundant with breakdowns by gender and other protected characteristics.
- Require the reinitiating (or implementation in the NI context) of gender pay gap reporting; including reporting on pay gaps during the COVID-19 lockdown.
- Do not turn to austerity measures to pay for the cost of the crisis.
- Invest in social infrastructure, including health, care and education.
- Design a sustainable and stable social care system so that no-one has unmet needs, free to the point of use with well paid, well trained permanent staff and funded via general taxation.
- Reform the social security system so that it protects all people, including migrants, against risk, poverty and destitution.
- Rethink work so that jobs pay a decent wage regardless of age – a true living wage for all – and reflects a shared balance between work, care and leisure for all.
- Take action to address the housing crisis by reducing rent and increasing housing support.
- Sustainably funding the women's sector so that no woman is left in danger.
- Introduce policies to encourage sharing of care and unpaid work between women and men.

Recommendations from Carers Week Report which we endorse include<sup>53</sup>:

- There is a significant role for information and advice for carers, forward planning, but also better support so that people can rely on what they need.
- Whilst Governments in every nation across the UK have implemented measures to support carers, there is no doubt that there are gaps that need to be plugged to improve carers' lives in the short term. In the longer term, the Government needs to build a better future for carers that tackles the underlying issues that they face.
- Increase awareness of the role of caring and unpaid carers - the NI Assembly should promote awareness of the important role of unpaid carers and caring and introduce more concrete support so that value is recognised practically.

---

<sup>52</sup> UKWBG (May 2020), 'Briefing from the UK Women's Budget Group: Easing Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women', (available online): <https://bit.ly/3qhxyzPW>

<sup>53</sup> See (n38).

- Fund and rebuild social care and health services - the NI Assembly needs to recognise the amount of pressure the system has been under during the coronavirus outbreak, and the funding shortages that were widely recognised for many years before the crisis. There needs to be a significant increase in funding levels to allow the social services and the NHS to rebuild after the crisis, alongside bringing forward plans for long-term reform of social care. Greater investment in care will lead to a healthier and happier population that is better able to balance important aspects of their lives, including personal relationships, work and family.
- End carers' financial hardship - Financial support for carers must be urgently improved, which would particularly benefit women who are more likely to be caring and providing higher levels of care. The UK Government and NI Assembly should immediately increase the basic level of Carer's Allowance and introduce a £20 per week increase to match the rise in Universal Credit.
- Greater consistency is needed in connecting carers to support available to look after their own mental and physical health and wellbeing. Support for carers to take part in physical activity, for example, can be hugely beneficial in preventing them developing health problems in later life as well as reducing isolation.
- Support working carers more through employers and by Government - Employers, and the NI Assembly, should ensure that there are carer-friendly policies in place that enable working carers to balance their caring responsibilities with work. We fully support the Government's plans to introduce an entitlement to take care leave for working carers; our preference would be for this to be paid.
- Schools, colleges, and universities should be encouraged to introduce policies and programmes that support carers and improve their experience of education,
- Increase funding for carers breaks, better funding for social care, develop a supportive healthcare system, end carers' financial hardship, create a carer-friendly work environment and introduce paid carers leave.

The WPG also supports UN recovery recommendations to<sup>54</sup>:

- First, immediate support for at-risk workers, enterprises, jobs and incomes, to avoid closures, job losses and income decline.
- Second, a greater focus on both health and economic activity after lockdowns ease, with workplaces that are safe, and rights for all.

---

<sup>54</sup> (n7).

- Third, mobilisation now for a human-centred, green, sustainable and inclusive recovery that harnesses the potential of new technologies to create decent jobs for all and takes advantage of the creative and positive ways companies and workers have adapted to these times.

Finally, we recognise that some policy decisions are not possible through devolved institutions and when looking at the UK as a whole, the WPG would encourage gender-budgeting and progressive fiscal and monetary policy making from the UK government. In particular, the WPG would like to endorse calls from Tax Justice UK in agreeing common goals to build back a better world affected by coronavirus. These calls include drastic tax reform across the UK as Tax Justice UK have highlighted that:

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

The UK's approach to tax is dysfunctional: we don't raise enough money, avoidance is rife and wealth is under-taxed. Despite progress, estimates suggest that £35 billion to £90 billion of tax goes uncollected per year.

The government also spends over £164bn a year on tax reliefs - many of which are badly targeted and largely benefit the well off and big companies. The corporate tax rate has been slashed from 28% in 2010 to the current 19%. The UK also contributes through its reliefs and loopholes to a broken international tax system, which deprives other countries of revenue.

The Covid-19 crisis shows that the government has huge financial power, flexibility and choice over how to support public spending. Tax reform to support a fairer and greener future argues that as the immediate crisis fades there will be big political debates about how to build back better. 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.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Tax Justice UK (June 2020), 'Progressive groups call for tax reform post-covid', <https://bit.ly/3vSAf7L>

We support the following recommendations from Tax Justice UK<sup>56</sup>:

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

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

#### 5.2.4 Addressing Women's Employment and the Skills Barometer

The current Skills Barometer, which is used to determine training priorities based on predictions of future skills requirements for the NI economy, only places value on skills that are viewed to promote productivity in the traditional sense<sup>57</sup>. Because of this, it disregards apprenticeships that are majority women and girls, such as social care. In a 2019 report<sup>58</sup> on the Skills Barometer, 'Caring Personal Services' was predicted to be one of the largest contributors to job growth in NI in the next decade, yet no provisions

---

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Ballantine, J., Rouse, M., Gray, A.M. 2021. *Gender Budgeting: Working Paper 2 Case Study: Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland*. (<https://bit.ly/3h0bNNs>)

<sup>58</sup> Ulster University Economic Policy Centre. 2019. *NI Skills Barometer 2019*. (<https://bit.ly/3joO7nv>)

were planned to meet this forecasted demand. In a 2015 report<sup>59</sup> on the Skills Barometer, it noted that upskilling would not be considered when creating predictions due to the assumption that, “these individuals are already in the labour market, will remain with their current employers after training and do not represent additional supply to the labour market.” When looking at an apprenticeship like social care, which requires low levels of qualifications and is mainly women, the exclusion of upskilling has significant gender implications. If the Skills Barometer cannot predict future demand for upskilling, women with low levels of qualifications that need upskilling to perform their duties, such as those in social care, will be disproportionately disadvantaged. This is a part of a larger issue surrounding labour that is considered, “...highly skilled yet have a low level of formal qualification.”<sup>60</sup> The discrepancy of skills and qualifications leads to exploitative implications for women in areas like social care, as it depreciates their skilled labour, perpetuates the gender pay gap and adds to women’s pension poverty.

### Recommendations:

- Further research into the extent of current upskilling and the future demand for upskilling that considers the gendered impacts.
- Recognise the value of social care and other apprenticeships that are considered ‘highly skilled’ yet require low level qualifications and increase funding to these apprenticeships, which typically are majority women and girls.

---

<sup>59</sup> Ulster University Economic Policy Centre. 2015. *NI Skills Barometer Findings Report: “Skills in demand.”* (<https://bit.ly/3hiqLqU>)

<sup>60</sup> Ulster University Economic Policy Centre. 2019. *NI Skills Barometer 2019.* (<https://bit.ly/3joO7nv>)



## 5.3 Women's Poverty and Austerity

### 5.3.1 Women's Poverty and Austerity

- Please see Women's Regional Consortium Response for more detail on this issue or the full Feminist Recovery Plan.

### 5.3.2 Increasing Financial Hardship and Debt

- Please see Women's Regional Consortium Response for more detail on this issue or the full Feminist Recovery Plan.

## 5.4 Childcare

### 5.4.1 Childcare in Northern Ireland

The Women's Policy Group supports the [Childcare for All Campaign](#) and believes that universal, affordable, high quality childcare provision, which meets the diverse needs of all children and families, is essential for economic recovery in Northern Ireland. This is fundamental to facilitating women's participation in and ability to access paid work, education and training and to 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 faced stark choices between their work and childcare commitments, as school closures and limited access to childcare settings created significant challenges for families, particularly during the first few months of the pandemic when childcare was closed to all except the children of key workers and vulnerable children. Research has shown that women are more likely to care for children and other family members, either in addition to their work, or instead of paid work. This can apply particularly to parents in certain situations, for example, to parents of a child with a disability, as childcare options are extremely limited even in ordinary circumstances or to those in lone parent households. This increases the risk of poverty and is also likely to have health impacts for parents.

Particularly in the initial lockdown period, we know anecdotally of families who faced stark choices between losing employment or presenting health risks to grandparents where no other childcare was 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. The initial eligibility for registered childcare was restricted only to certain key workers as defined by the Department of Health meaning some key worker parents were forced to risk being infected due to the nature of their work, or were unable to 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 and economic crisis.

Whilst the Job Retention Scheme, amendments to Universal Credit and other benefits and expansion of the definition of key workers – and eventual removal, with childcare open to all - 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, access to affordable and accessible childcare provision is crucial. As Northern Ireland transitions to recovery planning, with the roll out of the COVID-19 vaccination programme, there have been welcome steps taken to ease the COVID-19 lockdown.

However, it has been both concerning and disappointing that the issue of access to childcare has been noticeably absent from key policy and strategy documents including the first NI Executive Roadmap to recovery; an alarming omission that was also the case in the UK and Ireland recovery roadmaps. Furthermore, the Economic Recovery Action Plan setting out a range of actions to help kick-start economic recovery failed to mention childcare as a central part of our economic recovery from COVID-19. There was also limited recognition of how the recovery plan can support women<sup>61</sup>. It was equally disappointing that the '10X Economy: An Economic Vision for a decade of innovation'<sup>62</sup> based on creating a change in how we think about our economy, did not include childcare. This is particularly concerning given the report's recognition of the 'challenging levels of economic inactivity' – it's vital that the key role of affordable and accessible childcare in helping parents to get into and stay in work is considered. Access to childcare is a critical part of our economic infrastructure and it is necessary for people to be able to return to workplace settings, as well as for those working from home, and a key component to any pathway to recovery. It will not be possible to secure a sustainable, meaningful economic recovery that is experienced by everyone without childcare being treated as a major contributing factor<sup>63</sup>.

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

---

<sup>61</sup> Department for the Economy, 'Economic Recovery Action Plan' (25 February 2021) <https://bit.ly/3d1R89x>

<sup>62</sup> Department for the Economy, 'A 10x Economy' (11 May 2021) <https://bit.ly/3zTizvO>

<sup>63</sup> Childcare for All Campaign Statements on Childcare and COVID-19: [Childcare for All Campaign – COVID-19 Statement \(childcareforallni.com\)](#) (May 2020), [Childcare for All Campaign – Childcare critical to families and economy \(childcareforallni.com\)](#) (June 2020)

as many as 10,000 childcare settings across the UK 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 used<sup>64</sup>.

Positively, the Northern Ireland Executive accepted the need to provide financial support for the childcare sector at this unprecedented time, allocating approximately £32 million in support up to the end of March 2021 in a series of schemes rolled out by the Department of Education<sup>65</sup>. This funding has been critical to the sustainability of the sector, and while there were initial issues such as the slow process of issuing funds and insufficient amounts allocated to childminders, these were rectified following feedback from the sector, and the support has been broadly welcomed. However, many continue to face ongoing challenges including increased expenditure and workforce issues in relation to recruiting and retaining staff. While these issues are not new, and many existed long before the pandemic, it has certainly exacerbated them meaning that, without longer term investment, providers will continue to struggle with their sustainability with the result that parents may face further challenges in accessing and affording the childcare they need. At the time of writing, it is unknown if any further financial support will be made available to childcare providers in the short to medium term, but it's clear that a long-term strategy to support the childcare sector is urgently needed.

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 was given in the early months of the pandemic to the misalignment between the reopening of many sectors of our economy while childcare options remained limited<sup>66</sup>. As highlighted under the gender segregation and care work section of this pillar, many families were forced to rely on support from other family members for childcare to enable them to access the workforce. In the most recent lockdown, from January 2021 in Northern Ireland no restrictions were placed on parents' ability to access registered childcare, recognising the vital role of childcare in enabling parents to work – including those working from home. While schools reverted to virtual learning to all but the children of key workers and vulnerable children, registered childcare settings have remained open, providing a vital service.

---

<sup>64</sup> See: Richard Adams (April 2020), 'UK childcare industry 'crushed' by coronavirus crisis', The Guardian, (available online) <https://bit.ly/3xOyUjw> 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://bit.ly/3j6w4Cz>

<sup>65</sup> Department of Education, 'Weir announces further measures to support childcare providers' (February 2021) <https://bit.ly/3gWgw1E>

<sup>66</sup> See: Dr Lisa Wilson, (May 2020), 'Employment and access to childcare during the Covid-19 crisis', Nevin Economic Research Institute, (available online): <https://bit.ly/2UkW8PV>, p.3.

Research from the Fawcett Society, UK Women's Budget Group and academics found that by May 2020, half of parents with young children were struggling to make ends meet and women key workers were facing significantly more anxiety and under pressure to work<sup>67</sup>.

Additional findings on parents and key workers' concerns include:

- Almost half (48%) of parents 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,
- 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 failure to invest longer term in our vital childcare infrastructure in Northern Ireland will exacerbate many of the concerns highlighted above as we move further out of lockdown and more women either readjust to work outside the home, or struggle with unemployment. The childcare sector in Northern Ireland continues to face challenges, which may in turn mean that barriers for women accessing work, education and training will remain in place.

In 2020, [Employers For Childcare](#) conducted two surveys examining childcare in Northern Ireland – one prior to the pandemic, in February and March 2020, and one in September 2020, following months of lockdown and as children started to move back into school. The findings provide a vital insight into the childcare challenges of 2020 – those which it is clear existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and those that have been exacerbated by it.

In the first few months of the pandemic – April to June 2020, childcare was closed to all but the children of key workers (as defined by the Department of Health), and a lockdown restriction was placed on inter-household interactions, ensuring that access to childcare was a real challenge in the initial months of the pandemic for parents. As a result, 64% of respondents said they experienced a change to their

---

<sup>67</sup> O 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://bit.ly/3h1p86Y>

working arrangements during the pandemic, whether that meant working from home, changing their hours of work or being placed on furlough.

Where childcare was impacted, the effect on parents in terms of their work was clear:

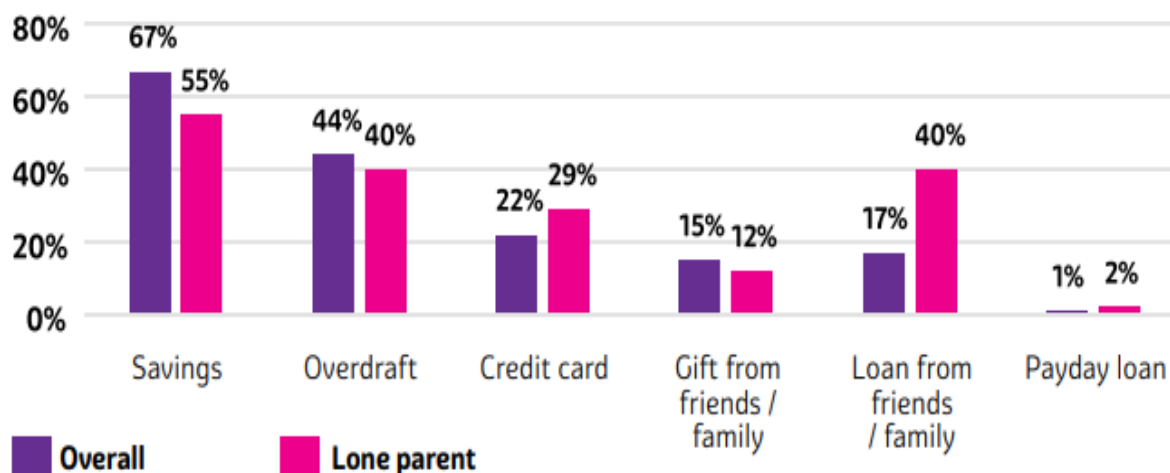
- 18% had to use unpaid leave or annual leave to manage childcare – rising to 20% of mothers, and 31% of lone parents,
- 28% had to work outside of their normal working hours to manage childcare – rising to 31% of mothers and 38% of lone parents,
- 57% had to balance working alongside childcare responsibilities - rising to 61% of mothers and 82% of lone parents,
- 2% had to leave work entirely - rising to 3% of mothers and 8% of lone parents.

Looking at the broader affordability and accessibility of childcare for parents and childcare providers, the survey results show:

- For a third of families, the childcare bill is the largest monthly outgoing – more than their mortgage or rent,
- 44% reported regularly using means other than their income to pay for childcare including savings, overdrafts, credit cards and even payday loans,
- 50% of parents report that their family is 'going without' in order to meet their childcare costs,
- Almost one third of childcare providers (32%) reported a decrease in their income in the previous year, with 72% having either just broken even or made a loss.

The figures above are extremely concerning, especially for lone parents in Northern Ireland. Figure 28 below from the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2020 shows the various methods that parents who are struggling may resort to pay their childcare bill, other than their salary, with lone parents in particular being more likely to resort to a credit card or a loan from friends or family:

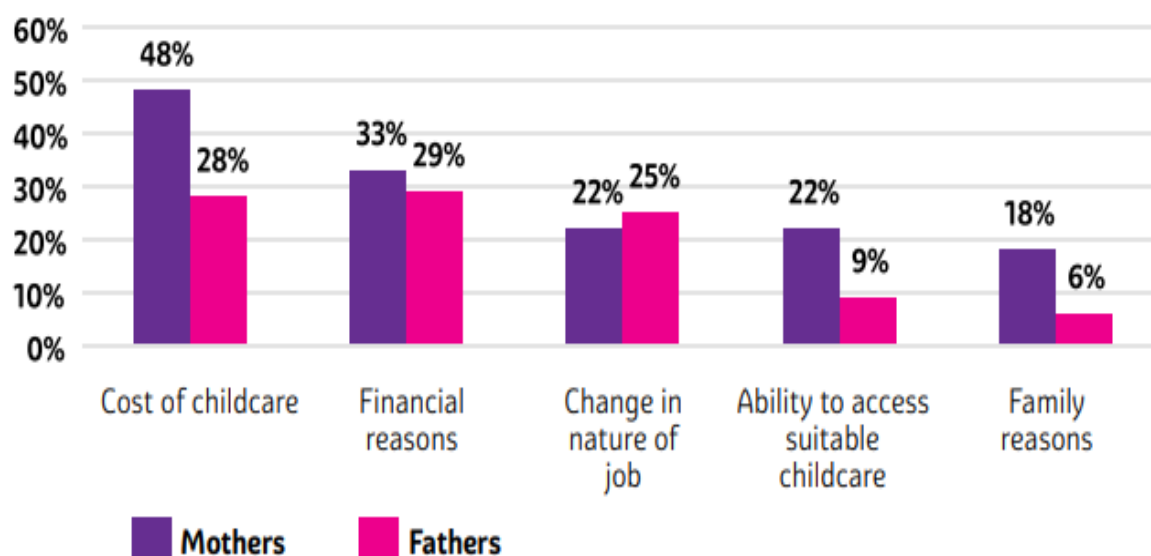
Figure 28: Means of Paying for Childcare Bill



Source: *Employers for Childcare, Northern Ireland Childcare Survey (2020)*, p.42

Employers For Childcare research also found that in the last year, over half (52%) of parents had experienced a change in their working hours. 12% of parents had either decreased their hours of work or left work altogether. Across households, mothers were more likely to experience a change in their working hours, 17% of mothers decreased their hours of work or left work altogether compared to just 4% of fathers. Similarly, mothers were more likely to report a change in their working patterns. Where there was a change, we asked respondents to identify the reasons for this – see figure 29 below which highlights that the most common reason was linked to the cost of childcare, with almost half of mothers (48%) citing this as a reason, compared to 28% of fathers. Almost a quarter of mothers linked a change in their working hours to the ability to access suitable childcare, while only 9% of fathers attributed this reason to a change in their working hours.

Figure 29: Reasons for Changes to Working Patterns



Source: *Employers For Childcare, Northern Ireland Childcare Survey (2020)*, p.46

A recent TUC report on ‘Forced out: The cost of getting childcare wrong’<sup>68</sup> 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’<sup>69</sup>

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 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<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> TUC (June 2020), ‘Forced out: The cost of getting childcare wrong’, TUC, (available online) <https://bit.ly/3d9kp2a>

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p.2.

<sup>70</sup> 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 dads<sup>71</sup>
- 56.2% of mothers had to make a change to their employment due to childcare, compared to 22.4% of fathers<sup>72</sup>

In particular, we would like to reference TUC concerns<sup>73</sup> 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.”

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<sup>74</sup>. The above statistics from the TUC coupled with the Northern Ireland specific data from Employers for Childcare,

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> TUC (June 2020), ‘Forced out: The cost of getting childcare wrong’, TUC, (available online) <https://bit.ly/3d9kp2a>

<sup>74</sup> 2 IFS (2020) ‘How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?’, (available online) <https://bit.ly/2UA07IN>



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.

For workers in the childcare sector who have worked tirelessly on the front line during the pandemic, to seek to minimise the negative effects on the learning and development of children, major concerns relating to the attitudes of undervaluing care work through the underinvestment and gender segregation in the sector. The Low Pay Commission found pay to be low in the childcare sector<sup>75</sup> and 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 implement sectoral agreements at the ground level, have also been shown to give the greatest premium to low paid workers.

---

<sup>75</sup> Low Pay Commission (2020) [National Minimum Wage \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

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, despite commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. The childcare sector is one facing a sustainability crisis and deep gender segregation. Focus needs to be placed on creating greater diversity within the sector to support the needs of BME families and children with disabilities, to remove stereotypes of working in childcare being seen as a “woman’s job”, and to ensure that any provision in place is one that supports the needs of women, families, children, providers and wider society.

In an important development since the start of the pandemic, a new [All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare](#) was established at Stormont in the summer of 2020. One of the group’s first meetings was themed on the role of childcare to our economic recovery from COVID-19, with a focus on maternal employment and the gendered impact of COVID-19<sup>76</sup>. Presentations from Dr Corina Miller (Research Fellow, Administrative Data Research Centre NI), Tina McKenzie (Managing Director, Staffline Ireland and Policy Chair, FSB NI) and Rachel Powell (Women’s Sector Lobbyist, Women’s Resource and Development Agency) highlighted how accessible and affordable childcare is fundamental to facilitating women’s full and equal participation in both our economy and society. It was emphasised throughout the meeting that, without this provision, women do not have equal access to paid work, education and training, and employers do not have access to the full range of talent for their workforce. The gendered impact of COVID-19 was also demonstrated. It was noted that the childcare workforce can be predominantly female, and it is important to ensure that their vital work is recognised through decent pay and progression. Looking ahead, the All-Party Group will be an important vehicle for securing progress on a Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland.

---

<sup>76</sup> See Employers for Childcare APG: <https://bit.ly/3j6wZD1>

### 5.4.2 The Women's Centres Childcare Fund (WCCF)

The Women's Centres Childcare Fund (WCCF) was established in April 2008 and followed on from the Children and Young Peoples Fund (C&YPF) as part of an emergency Departmental response to ensure key childcare services provided in 14 women's centres operating in disadvantaged communities were kept open pending an Executive decision about their future funding.

WCCF enables Women's Centres to provide childcare places that are 100% supported for the most disadvantaged children and families. These sessional places (77,000 two-hour sessions) ensure that disadvantaged children have an opportunity to experience a childcare setting, to socialise, interact, play and learn in a supported environment.

Parents who avail of WCCF supported childcare also access a wide range of programmes available in their communities. Many of the services involve support to parents including: parenting skills, back to work programmes, advice services and health programmes. Therefore, WCCF enables the most excluded in disadvantaged communities to access support and engage in community development activities.

For some women (including ethnic minorities and lone parents) the prospect of increased economic participation can depend on the availability of appropriate integrated childcare and access to education/training opportunities at community level. A lack of appropriate integrated childcare and community education acts as a fundamental barrier to the engagement of socio-economically disadvantaged women in education, training and employment. This is the kind of integrated provision that is provided by WCCF and is so vital to these women and now even more so with the impact of the pandemic.

WCCF contributes to reducing child poverty, provides opportunities for parents (especially women) to access training, education and work and also to contribute to their communities thereby tackling disadvantage. As such the WCCF strongly aligns with a number of government strategies including the Child Poverty Strategy, the Anti-Poverty Strategy and the Gender Equality Strategy. It also aligns with one of the immediate priorities of the Executive: 'Delivering a fair and compassionate society that supports working families and the most vulnerable' as detailed in New Decade, New Approach.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> New Decade, New Approach, January 2020

Despite the importance of this childcare offering in tackling disadvantage and promoting equality WCCF continues to be administered on an annual basis and has been subject to Departmental cuts/austerity measures since 2012 which has seen the overall allocation reduced by just over 20% in that period. Progress on childcare provision in Northern Ireland must recognise the need for low cost/no cost childcare provision for marginalised women in disadvantaged and rural areas.

### Recommendations:

- Investing adequately, based on an informed assessment of realistic needs, to deliver a high-quality childcare infrastructure that is affordable for all to access, and providers to deliver.
- Fully implementing 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.
- Work extensively with the women's sector and childcare sector in the development of a childcare strategy Northern Ireland.
- 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 workforce.
- Government must recognise the case for properly sustaining childcare provision through the WCCF model on a ring-fenced, protected basis given the Fund's positive evaluation<sup>78</sup> in terms of need, impact and value for money.

---

<sup>78</sup> Evaluation of Regional Support Arrangements for the Voluntary and Community Sector, Final Report, June 2015, DSD and DARD

## 5.5 Rural Women

### 5.5.1 Rural Women Economy - Context

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 Poverty<sup>79</sup> The accessibility of education, training, work and childcare provision and the cost and availability of public transport are factors in determining women's participation; particularly in rural areas<sup>80</sup>. Women in NI remain under-represented in public and political life<sup>81</sup> 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' Programme<sup>82</sup> 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 voice<sup>83</sup> 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%)'<sup>84</sup>.

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

---

<sup>79</sup> Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation, DAERA

<sup>80</sup> Rural Women's Manifesto Rural Women Speak NIRWN June 2015

<sup>81</sup>. Women and Public Appointments in NI <https://bit.ly/2TlvMx1>

<sup>82</sup> See Politics Plus Women in Public Appointments Programme: <https://bit.ly/2UMGflv>

<sup>83</sup> Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015)

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

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<sup>85</sup> concluded that rural women needed additional financial support in this Programme:

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

As a result of no Executive in place for 3 years this has never been redressed. It is imperative that women in rural areas have proposed future budgets; Programme for government and policy recovery planning assessed for rural impacts<sup>86</sup> to ensure the inequity of Government resourcing does not continue. NI Government funding support for the work of the only dedicated regional service to support rural women in their communities (NIRWN) is now only 13% of what it was in 2007<sup>87</sup>.

### Recommendations:

- The rural investment in women is equitable, proportional and sufficient to animate and build critical mass versus urban interests.
- Proposed budgets, PfG and policy recovery plans take account of rural needs.
- Historic underinvestment in rural women is recognised and efforts made to redress when future resourcing is being planned.
- Recognition that all Government Departments have a responsibility to deliver for rural women, not only DAERA.

## 5.5.2 Rural Business

Labour intensive businesses, or those that rely heavily upon occupations and skills deemed by governments to be non-essential, are most immediately at risk and a principal source of wider supply chain disruption, everything else being equal. In this regard, two characteristics of rural economies are pertinent. Firstly, rural areas, typically have a population distribution skewed to older people compared to urban

---

<sup>85</sup> Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015)

<sup>86</sup> Rural Needs Act, 2016

<sup>87</sup> NI Rural Women’s Network

areas<sup>88</sup>. Older people are more likely to require critical care and/or die as a result of a coronavirus infection<sup>89</sup>. There are also more older women than men as women have a longer average life span. UK Government advice, which mirrors that in many other European countries, is that those aged over 70 should socially isolate, making them dependent on others in rural communities to collect shopping and medical prescriptions. It follows that self-isolating and shielding behaviour will also disproportionately impact rural areas through the availability of ('grey') labour for businesses, social enterprises and volunteer work and through the impact of their reduced expenditure on goods and services from local businesses ('grey pound').

Secondly, as labour relocates to a home working context, this could be more difficult in those rural areas suffering from inferior access to high quality broadband<sup>90</sup>. This weakness will also affect homeschooling during closures and be exacerbated by concurrent demands for limited available bandwidth (data transfer capacity) among multiple household members.<sup>91</sup> As the Covid-19 pandemic progressed it was clear that in the reality of living with digital exclusion daily in many rural areas was contributing to the isolation of rural dwellers and reducing the work from home and homeschooling options for many. 68509 homes in NI faced the Covid-19 lockdown with inadequate access to Internet broadband services<sup>92</sup>

### Recommendations:

- Succession planning support in rural businesses and community settings
- Genuine, flexible working solutions for rural areas that includes access to Broadband and care support.
- Interim Broadband and digital inclusion support as Project Stratum<sup>93</sup> rolls out such as; opening up wi-fi in publicly funded facilities.

---

<sup>88</sup> Eurostat. Statistics on Rural Areas in the EU Eurostat; Eurostat: Brussels, Belgium, 2017

<sup>89</sup> Wu, Z.; McGoogan, J.M. Characteristics of and Important Lessons from the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Outbreak in China: Summary of a Report of 72 314 Cases From the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. JAMA 2020, 323, 1239–1242. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

<sup>90</sup> Commission for Rural Communities. Rural Micro-Businesses: What Makes Some Thrive in a Challenging Economic Climate? Commission for Rural Communities: Gloucester, UK, 2013. 13. OFCOM.

<sup>91</sup> The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Implications for Rural Economies; Jeremy Phillipson et al; Northumbria University, May 2020 <https://bit.ly/3AmIZXp>

<sup>92</sup> PPR, No One Left Behind, Breaking the Digital Divide <https://bit.ly/3A64ueG>

<sup>93</sup> See Strategic Investment Board: Project Stratum, <https://bit.ly/3hiqrP6>

### 5.5.3 Rural VCSE

Rural areas have often been at the vanguard of community and social enterprise<sup>94</sup>, and COVID-19 is itself leading to the promulgation of many positive examples of community, neighbour and volunteer support. How public, private and third sectors effectively work together - and, crucially, how they work with the rural voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) ecosystem - is critical to immediate emergency response and will be vital to longer-term recovery. However, whilst the VCSE sector is adept at balancing social, economic and environmental needs, it has been heavily stretched in the years leading up to the pandemic and now faces a range of challenges<sup>95</sup>. With social shielding of older populations, who are an important source of volunteer labour, the sector too is facing challenges linked to labour availability. Thus, while the crisis offers opportunities for rural communities to make use of and to strengthen existing volunteering and neighbourliness, a weakness of the rural social support system is its reliance on older volunteers to look out for an ageing population.

In research conducted in 2018<sup>96</sup> rural women identified the importance of community spaces and community informal networks of support. There was agreement amongst those surveyed that, rural women needed a place to meet and a reason to meet up. The conversations around this primarily linked inextricably to the provision of education and training for women in rural areas and the lack thereof. In relation to addressing social isolation those we spoke with concurred that being able to provide any class locally, should it be: yoga, craft classes, information talks etc, created a mechanism to engage those who were socially isolated. NIRWN's member groups operate within their local area and as such hold local knowledge such as, who has recently suffered a bereavement, who is experiencing a difficult time, who has overwhelming caring responsibilities and as such they quietly and discreetly attempt to engage these people in their activities and offer to bring them along. This however is only possible if they are in a position to deliver activities locally; without exception all were finding that 'It is increasingly difficult to find funding to support overheads like room rental to be able to run any activities'. This research was conducted pre pandemic but it follows that in a post pandemic environment it is critical to recognise and resource this work so rural women and their communities can 'Build Back Better'.

This sector is driven by a large number of female leaders and volunteers; women predominate in voluntary and community organisations, for example, comprising 75%

---

<sup>94</sup> Steinerowski, A.A.; Steinerowska-Streb, I. Can social enterprise contribute to creating sustainable rural communities? Using the lens of structuration theory to analyse the emergence of rural social enterprise. *Local Econ.* 2012, 27, 167–182. [CrossRef] 25. Townsend, L.; Wallace, C.; Smart, A.; Norman, T. Building Virtual Bridges: How Rural Micro-Enterprises Develop Social Capital in Online and Face-to-Face Settings. *Sociol. Rural.* 2016, 56, 29–47

<sup>95</sup> Milbourne, L.; Cushman, M. Complying, Transforming or Resisting in the New Austerity? Realigning Social Welfare and Independent Action among English Voluntary Organisations. *J. Soc. Policy* 2015, 44, 463–485

<sup>96</sup> Rural Voices Report NIRWN 2018



of the paid workforce of voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland<sup>97</sup> largely, it could be argued, because employment is often insecure and reliant on time bound funding. There is a need for governments to view organisations in this sector in a similar light to private and public businesses and employees, providing financial support to sustain their viability. Support is especially justified, given that in many rural communities these organisations play the leading role in organising and supporting older, young and vulnerable residents.

The VSCE organisations constitute the 'horizontal' relationships important for social capital, community-based networks that comprise both 'bonding' capital within communities and 'bridging' capital between communities on the basis of issues such as equality or domestic violence. The idea of utilising input from civil society to increase the quality of democratic participation should accord with the principle of equality, allowing women to have equal influence on policy-making structures<sup>98</sup> in their localities. There may be a need to bolster younger volunteering and neighbourliness and repurpose older volunteering to fit with current restraints and the limits placed on their movement. These extra demands need external support, but the VCSE sector often falls between business, charity and household policy frameworks<sup>99</sup>. COVID-19 serves to further emphasise the imperative for community capacity building and support through the rural VCSE sector, to allow it to help individuals, households and communities during the pandemic and recovery.

## Recommendations

- Government to view organisations in this sector in a similar light to private and public businesses and employees, providing financial support to sustain their viability.
- Recognition and support of the critical role women have in community organisations and on enhancing social cohesion.
- Resourcing and support for rural community capacity building to aid Covid-19 recovery and sustainability.

---

<sup>97</sup> Workforce Survey (2014), NICVA

<sup>98</sup> Women, Civil Society and Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland: Paths to Peace through Women's Empowerment (2004), Michael Potter

<sup>99</sup> Agapitova, N.; Sanchez, B.; Tinsley, E. Government Support to the Social Enterprise Sector: Comparative Review of Policy Frameworks and Tools; The World Bank: Washington, DC, USA, 2017

### 5.5.4 Gender and the Rural Economy

The impacts of COVID-19 are experienced differently between genders<sup>100</sup>. Many of the frontline occupations affected by the virus impact disproportionately on women. Teachers, carers and nurses are predominantly women. Throughout the EU, women are predominantly responsible for childcare<sup>101</sup> and home schooling is likely to have gendered implications within families. Female rural entrepreneurs and women who have undertaken farm diversification initiatives have often done so to fit around their other childcare and caring responsibilities<sup>102</sup>. Maintaining these businesses while undertaking additional COVID-19 caring roles will be a challenge. There may be gendered effects that will mean differential access to household assets that can be used to buffer the effects of the coronavirus on firms. During Foot and Mouth Disease, male-owned firms were far more likely to draw on unpaid labour of household members, and female-owned businesses were less likely to use household savings to ease cash flow or to take on additional loans or debts, in order to limit risks to families and households<sup>103</sup>. There is currently a high level of anxiety amongst rural women about the impact of lack of and cost of childcare as we move into a new school year that seems inevitably to include some form of blended learning.

#### Recommendations:

- Recognition that the impacts of Covid-19 have been experienced differently by rural women who proportionately take on more caring responsibilities,
- Rural business support initiatives are required,
- Rural care solutions need to be created to support rural women business owners and workers as we move forward.

### 5.5.5 Rural Women and the Digital Economy

This is the opportune time to increase rural women's participation in the digital economy, including digital marketing and digital trade. Of course, this means that the

---

<sup>100</sup> The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Implications for Rural Economies; Jeremy Phillipson et al; Northumbria University, May 2020 <https://bit.ly/3AmIZXp>

<sup>101</sup> Erhel, C.; Guergoat-Larivière, M. Labor Market Regimes, Family Policies, and Women's Behavior in the EU. *Fem. Econ.* 2013, 19, 76–109.

<sup>102</sup> Shortall, S.; Sutherland, L.; McKee, A.; Hopkins, J. Women in Farming and the Agriculture Sector; Scottish Government: Edinburgh, Scotland, 2017.

<sup>103</sup> Phillipson, J.; Bennett, K.; Lowe, P.; Raley, M. Adaptive responses and asset strategies: The experience of rural micro-firms and Foot and Mouth Disease. *J. Rural Stud.* 2004, 20, 227–243. [CrossRef]

necessary enablers must first be addressed, starting with increasing digital identification for rural SMEs to allow innovative ways of securing collateral and credit histories — for example, through the use of data from utilities, trade creditors, and purchases of inputs<sup>104</sup>. With the social distancing phenomena, the era of gathering rural people in groups for capacity building will end. Development organisations should adapt to ICT-based capacity building. This includes providing digital, virtual, and mobile-based business training, coaching, and mentoring related to economic recovery, digital marketing and communication channels, and overall digital financial literacy.

### Recommendations:

- Increase rural women's participation and opportunities in the digital economy, including digital marketing and digital trade.
- Increase digital identification for rural SMEs to allow innovative ways of securing collateral and credit histories.
- This includes providing digital, virtual, and mobile-based business training, coaching, and mentoring related to economic recovery, digital marketing and communication channels, and overall digital financial literacy.

## 5.6 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 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.<sup>105</sup>

The lockdown exposed the severe impact of governmental decisions to neglect public services on our society. Many of the existing socio-economic inequalities were exacerbated during the lockdown, as the lack of resilience or ability to cope with the ramifications of the pandemic became glaringly obvious.

The need for basic levels of income, access to food, childcare, a fully-functioning health service, education, changing considerations of “low-skilled” work to essential work, recognising the importance of unpaid care, digital poverty, holiday hunger, access to the internet and many more factors have been the topic of a lot of conversations in recent months. Now, more than ever, it is necessary to reassess our

---

<sup>104</sup> DEVEX International Development.

<sup>105</sup> Women's Policy Group NI (2021) to Discussion Document on a Climate Change Bill: <https://bit.ly/3zRn2PJ>

economic decision making and recent history of severely under-resourced public goods. Northern Ireland would not have been able to cope without those working in the areas above, and it is necessary to recognise this undervalued work; redistribute care responsibilities and reduce the levels of harm to our social, health, economic and environmental infrastructures.

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.'<sup>106</sup> As described by Cohen and MacGregor in the WBG and WEN paper, discussions on Green New Deal frameworks rarely incorporate gender, race and class.<sup>107</sup> The UK WBG and WEN paper looks at a Green New Deal from an intersectional feminist perspective, and it is an approach that the WPG would endorse for Northern Ireland in relation to our economic recovery and the NI Executive's aims for tackling climate change. The WPG submitted a response to the Environment, Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee on the Climate Change Bill in July 2021. This can be viewed [here](#).

### 5.6.1 Why is Climate Justice a Feminist Issue?

As discussed in the WEN and UK WBG's Report 'Towards a Feminist Green New Deal',<sup>108</sup> gender equality must be at the heart of plans to tackle the climate crisis. The climate crisis requires urgent action to transform the economy and society. Some key statistics on women's current situation in the UK include:<sup>109</sup>

- \* 85% of care jobs are done by women
- \* 32% of MPs in the House of Commons are women
- \* 80% of people displaced by climate change are women.

Women are disproportionately represented in the care work sector, both in paid and unpaid roles. As WEN argue:

“Paid and unpaid care work are an integral part of a transition to a green economy, and are, for the most part, already low carbon. The systemic

---

<sup>106</sup> Maeve Cohen and Sherilyn MacGregor (2020), '[Towards a Feminist Green New Deal for the UK: A Paper for the WBG Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy](https://bit.ly/3xQQiVl)', *UK Women's Budget Group and Women's Environmental Network*. <https://bit.ly/3xQQiVl>

<sup>107</sup> Maeve Cohen and Sherilyn MacGregor (May 2020), '[What would a Feminist Green New Deal look like?](https://bit.ly/3zTvptY) - Summary Briefing', *UK WBG and WEN*. <https://bit.ly/3zTvptY>

<sup>108</sup> Women's Environmental Network and UK Women's Budget Group (2020) '[Towards A Feminist Green New Deal](https://bit.ly/3xQQiVl)': <https://bit.ly/3xQQiVl>

<sup>109</sup> Women's Environmental Network (2021) '[Feminist Green New Deal](https://bit.ly/3j3r69x)' <https://bit.ly/3j3r69x>

lack of recognition and investment in social infrastructure has created industries in which small amounts of investment can create significant returns in both employment opportunities and service improvement...

From a feminist perspective, it is essential to balance the emphasis on decarbonising the economy with the stated commitment to redressing social injustice, and this requires both awareness of and strategies for changing gender norms and stereotypes...

Central to feminist ecological economics is the normative claim that gender equality should not be achieved at the expense of ecological degradation or the exploitation of nature and other species, and that environmental sustainability must not be achieved by exploiting feminised labour.”

### 5.6.2 Care Work: A Key Sustainable Industry

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.<sup>110</sup> Investment in free universal childcare especially, returns almost all of its initial investment.”<sup>111</sup>

“The care industry is 30% less polluting (in terms of greenhouse gas emissions) than the construction industry and, the education industry is 62% less polluting than the construction industry.”<sup>112</sup>

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

---

<sup>110</sup> ITUC (2016), ‘[Investing in a Care Economy](https://bit.ly/3zQsYIG): A gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries’, ITUC. <https://bit.ly/3zQsYIG>

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p.1.

<sup>112</sup> WBG calculations from Eurostat data: <https://bit.ly/3d5qUD9>

investment through additional tax revenue generated by the additional jobs created.<sup>113</sup>

### 5.6.3 A Feminist Green New Deal for Northern Ireland

We note the NI Executive commitments to ‘tackle climate change head on with a strategy to address the immediate and longer-term impacts of climate change’ in the New Decade, New Approach agreement.<sup>114</sup> The NI Executive commitments include:<sup>115</sup>

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

In particular, the WPG would like to make reference to aims for a “fair and just transition” alongside the Economic Strategy that will “support clean and inclusive growth and create jobs as part of a Green New Deal.” Before highlighting what a Feminist Green New Deal may look like, it is important to consider what Green New Deals typically include. Typical priorities highlighted by the UK WBG and WEN include:

- \* Decarbonising the economy,
- \* Democratising the economy,
- \* Creating fair green jobs,
- \* Preserving the natural environment,
- \* Reform of finance and banking systems,

---

<sup>113</sup> Women’s Budget Group (2020) ‘[Budget Representation to HM Treasury](#): Invest in Social Infrastructure’, UK Women’s Budget Group. <https://bit.ly/2T2cPiK>

<sup>114</sup> [New Decade, New Approach Agreement](#), p.8.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p.44.

- \* Community organising and ownership,
- \* International responsibilities to repay debts and inequalities.

In their proposed Feminist Green New Deal, these priorities would be combined with aims of gender-equality, including:

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

The WPG would add that in the context of Northern Ireland, the need for women's involvement in peacebuilding processes should also be a priority, as set out in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.<sup>116</sup>

The WBG and WEN Feminist Green New Deal has several recommendations under five broad themes:

1. Investment in (social) infrastructure - including transport, housing, agriculture and social infrastructure such as jobs and training for carers and educators,
2. Green jobs - emphasising the need to be aware of reproducing occupational gender segregation and take steps to enroll women in STEM jobs crucial to a green economy,
3. Sharing Care - recognising that paid care jobs are low carbon and redress gender inequality and women undertake the majority of unpaid care work,
4. Democracy and Ownership - encouraging women's community involvement in governance, especially BAME and disabled women, as they are underrepresented in all areas of political life and this needs rectified to democratise the economy,
5. (Inter)national responsibilities - reducing and redressing international inequalities.

### Recommendations:

Recommendations from the WBG and WEN, which we have applied to Northern Ireland, include:

---

<sup>116</sup> United Nations (2000) Security Council: [Resolution 1325](#) (UNSCR 1325), *Women, Peace and Security*.

#### *Investment in (social) infrastructure:*

- Co-designing social infrastructure at a local level with the needs of women taken into account,
- Taking the differing transport needs of women with caring responsibilities into account when creating transport plans; particularly given issues in Northern Ireland of inadequate rural public transport and the fact that women are more likely to rely on public transport.

#### *Green Jobs:*

- Provide subsidies and other incentives, including paid education leave, to support women, particularly low-income and BAME women, in accessing training and development programmes in high-skilled work in a new green economy,
- Provide subsidies and other incentives to those working in jobs at high risk of being replaced by automaton, particularly as women are at much higher risk of this,
- Encourage women and girls into male-dominated green sectors that are encouraged through a Northern Ireland Green New Deal.

#### *Sharing Care:*

- Recognising the dual-benefit job creation and increased tax revenue through investing in paid care jobs that are already done in an unpaid capacity by majority women,
- Through increased investment in care jobs and the care sector, not only will women's employment and economic opportunities increase, but children from disadvantaged backgrounds will benefit from increasing qualities of childcare and education,
- Broaden definitions of 'green jobs' beyond construction and technology to incorporate the care sector as an already existing low carbon, high compense sector that is increasingly neglected,
- Ensure that all green jobs in Northern Ireland include a real living wage, are securely contracted, ethically procured and unionised,
- Implement a 30-hour paid work week in recognition of unavoidable unpaid care,
- Actively encourage and incentivise care leave and caring responsibilities being undertaken by men,
- Establish a Universal Basic Income or Universal Basic Services to ensure minimum living standards and recognise and remunerate the £4.6 billion unpaid carers contribute to Northern Ireland each year,



- Balance recommendations for greater food self-reliance with recognition of the gendered, unpaid and low-paid labour involved in producing and providing food, particularly as Northern Ireland may be disproportionately impacted by different food standards to Great Britain post-Brexit,
- Supporting and developing sustainable small businesses that reduce domestic work through mass preparation and distribution of locally grown food.

#### *Democracy and Ownership:*

- Promoting economic, ecological and carbon education campaigns for schools and the wider public to be adequately funded through a Climate Change Act and within the Programme for Government,
- Ensure equality impact assessments of all environmental policies and ensure consultation on policies with groups representing various genders, races and classes within civil society,
- Make socio-economic equality of protected characteristics a key goal of any green new deal framework and ensure co-design of planning and policies with the Women's Sector,
- Promote a cultural shift towards valuing care as a key part of the infrastructure of the environment and economy.

#### *(Inter)national Responsibilities:*

- Ending the hostile environment in the UK towards migrants and fully remove information exchanges between public bodies (including those in Northern Ireland) and the Home Office,
- Promote fair tax policies which close tax loopholes, redistribute wealth between women and men and hold transnational corporations to account for exploitation of people and harm to the planet,<sup>117</sup>
- Introduce a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland,
- Protecting human rights, including sexual rights, reproductive rights, and working rights,
- Promote trade justice within supply chains and create ethical procurement guidelines in line with the above recommendations.

It is crucial that efforts are taken to mitigate against the impacts of the climate crisis on all people in Northern Ireland, but particularly women. Tackling gender equality must be at the core of these efforts, and recognition must be given to

---

<sup>117</sup> Examples provided by the WBG and WEN include a fossil fuels tax for corporations, a financial transaction tax and reforms of progressive taxation like income and corporation tax.

the unavoidable links between environmental and feminist issues. The above recommendations would support the NI Executive in meeting the requirements set out in New Decade, New Approach, whilst applying a gender lens to support a care economy and gender equality in any new green economy.

For further information on the issues highlighted in this section, please see the Women's Policy Group's Response to the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs' Discussion Document on a Climate Change Bill (February 2021) which can be accessed [here](#).

Several members of the WPG were also on the Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel, and we would like to take this opportunity to highlight recommendations made by the expert panel in their report published in March 2021:

#### Recommendations:<sup>118</sup>

- Co-design social infrastructure at a local level with the needs of women taken into account. This should include transport which is one of the biggest contributors to climate change, taking into account inadequate rural public transport in Northern Ireland and the fact that women are more likely to rely on public transport.
- Conduct a skills-needs analysis to establish the skills required by men and women to equally participate and benefit from opportunities created in the green economy. The information should be used to create targeted green skills development and training initiatives for both men and women.
- Provide subsidies and other incentives, including paid education leave, to support women, particularly low-income and BAME women, in accessing training and development programmes in high-skilled work in any new green economy.
- Ensure funding and resource allocation prioritises programs that train women and girls for non-traditional roles to enable them to make the transition into male-dominated occupations in the green economy.
- Ensure that all green jobs in Northern Ireland are paid at a real living wage, are securely contracted, ethically procured and unionised.
- Put in place accountability procedures to ensure all relevant stakeholders are held accountable for operating in a gender-responsive manner to achieve gender equality outcomes in the green economy. This can be done through gender responsive planning, monitoring and

---

<sup>118</sup> Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report (2021), <https://bit.ly/2SRZcmu> p.171

evaluation mechanisms to ensure that measures to advance gender equality in the green economy are having the desired impact.

- Invest in gender-disaggregated data which is critical for understanding the constraints affecting women and men's equal representation and participation in green job sectors.
- Broaden definitions of 'green jobs' beyond construction and technology to incorporate the care sector as an already existing low carbon, high recompense sector.
- Promote a cultural shift towards valuing care as a key part of the infrastructure of the environment and economy.
- Recognise the dual-benefit of job creation and increased tax revenue through investing in paid care jobs that are mostly done by women.
- Actively encourage and incentivise care leave and caring responsibilities being undertaken by men.
- Promote economic, ecological and carbon education campaigns for schools and the wider public to be adequately funded through a Climate Change Act and within the Programme for Government.
- Ensure the equal participation of rural women and girls in policy making processes on disaster mitigation and climate change.
- Ensure rural women are a target group in the development and delivery of a new Rural Development Programme for NI.
- Ensure equality impact assessments of all environmental policies and ensure consultation on policies with groups representing all Section 75 characteristics.
- Reallocate spending according to equality, wellbeing and sustainability objectives, for example, from polluting industries to green industries.

## **Cultural Pillar:**

## **5.7 Education and Training**

### **5.7.1 Equality Proofing Education Post-COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far reaching impacts on all aspects of NI society, not least education, with most pupils withdrawn from school for months at a time during the periods of strict lockdown. Although almost all pupils have now returned to a school setting in NI, it is important that the impact of the pandemic on their education

and mental and physical wellbeing is adequately addressed through future education policy.

The diverse needs of pupils must be taken into consideration; it is crucial that those who were already disadvantaged before the onset of the pandemic do not simply continue to become more disadvantaged. Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) will have experienced even more barriers to remote learning during lockdown than others. Whilst every child will have responded differently - some may have preferred home learning; others will have found it very difficult - the potential impact of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of children is hugely concerning and must be addressed as a major priority within schools. Some children may require specific support from their schools after lockdown. It is also important that the needs of staff are taken into account, with mitigating measures put in place to better promote equality where staff are differentially adversely impacted by changes in policy as a result of COVID-19.

Although it was inevitable that the pandemic would have an impact on how policies were developed by the Department of Education (DE), a worrying pattern emerged last year of the department failing to adequately consult with stakeholders on major decisions. Likewise, there was often a lack of visible equality screening of new policies.<sup>119</sup> Going forwards, as NI returns to something resembling normality, it is vital that departmental decisions subjected to the proper assessment processes to ensure they promote equality of opportunity under Section 75. It is imperative that the DE complies with its own equality scheme, including through direct consultation with affected groups, and conducts proper assessment of policies via screening and/or EQIA. Additionally, teachers must be properly informed, in advance, of changes in policy; they are expected to provide certainty for their pupils, but it is difficult for them to do so if they themselves are facing uncertainty.

Ideally, the return to school will not have to be halted again. However, it is important that contingency planning is undertaken to prepare for future closures. Even if there are no further surges of the virus, there is a strong likelihood that individual schools will have to close due to local outbreaks.

### Recommendations:

- Each time a new policy is developed by the Department of Education, it must, as a matter of course, undergo a) Equality screening / Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA); b) Rural Needs Impact Assessment; c) Consultation with

---

<sup>119</sup> See the Equality Coalition's briefing paper, '[Equality proofing the return to school](#)', for specific examples of the rushing through of policies.

relevant stakeholders. Whenever appropriate, the policy should be altered as a result of the above processes to ensure equality of opportunity.

- No child should be left behind as a result of the pandemic. It is likely there will be an increased demand on services supporting pupils with SEN and their teachers. These services should receive any additional resources they require. Likewise, schools must be provided with additional funding to combat any 'attainment gap' among pupils as a result of the pandemic.
- Schools should be supported by the department to take a whole-school, trauma informed approach to the return to school that incorporates a range of methods, such as changes to the formal curriculum, pastoral care, and counselling provision (including tailored support for LGBTQ+ pupils). The classroom must be made a safe space for all pupils. Additional funding should be provided as needed.
- Comprehensive guidance is needed to help teachers and pupils adjust to the 'new normal' within schools. The last guidance on the return to school (which is publicly available) was issued almost a year ago (June 2020)<sup>120</sup>. It is very surprising that this has not been since updated to incorporate lessons learned during the prior return to school and best practice examples, both from within NI and elsewhere.
- Universal free school meals should be provided to all children as a measure to combat poverty, improve educational outcomes, and improve public health.
- It is imperative that contingency planning is undertaken in case further school closures are required, incorporating joined-up working with other departments and resulting in published, publicly available guidance.

### 5.7.2 Equality and Diversity Education

It is evident from the shocking statistics that vulnerable groups in our society have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. This is true both within Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. People living in low-income areas, those with disabilities, older people, and people from minority ethnic backgrounds are all at increased risk of suffering serious illness and death as a result of COVID-19. The pandemic has harshly exposed pre-existing structural divisions and shown the consequences of failing to create a truly equal society. Depending on what happens next, including future government policy, we may be at risk of inequalities deepening even further. As life begins to return to relative normality and children return to school,

---

<sup>120</sup> Northern Ireland Reopening School Guidance - New School Day - 19 June 2020. Available [here](#).

it is more important than ever before that they receive adequate teaching on equality and diversity.

At present, rather than these themes being integrated across the curriculum, equality and diversity tend only to be taught within particular areas of learning (at primary level) and subjects (at secondary level). Primary school pupils are taught about equality and diversity as one element of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU), but how much time is spent on this will vary. Within secondary schools, it can be even more difficult for teachers to find space to look at these themes because of the focus on academic attainment, though subjects such as Religious Education, History, and English Literature are a more common home for teaching on equality and diversity than Mathematics and Science. Furthermore, teaching on diversity can sometimes become narrowly focused on the traditional sectarian divisions within NI, ignoring other complexities and obscuring the wider picture.

This has specific implications for Migrant and Black and Minority Ethnic people in school, where racist bullying may not be handled effectively due to lack of training. It also has implications for LGBTQ+ pupils, who are at higher risk of being bullied while also facing institutional barriers to expressing themselves and being who they are safely in an educational environment. Further training and education, for staff and students, would create a safer and more accepting environment for currently marginalised and often disenfranchised pupils. It would also build the foundations for an education system based in safety for all, centred on care, and focused on preparing our children to be tolerant and well-rounded members of society.

Effective teaching of equality and diversity often relies on there being committed teachers within schools who are willing to look for opportunities to explore these themes fully. Sometimes this involves signing up for optional initiatives such as Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning that have a focus on these areas, bringing in appropriate guest speakers and working directly with communities and civil society to improve learning in these areas. Not all schools will believe they have the time and resources to do this, while others will. This leads to a variation in the quality of equality and diversity education across the NI school system, which fails pupils.

Currently, schools are not subject to the requirements within Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, nor the Sex Discrimination (Gender Reassignment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999. There is a significant gap in equality legislation and rights protections across the board in Northern Ireland: nowhere is that more apparent than in our schools.

Current international guidelines for education encourage a focus on diversity and equality. For instance, one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (4.7) states:

“By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.”

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

### Recommendations:

- An increased focus on equality and diversity should be introduced into the curriculum when it is next updated.
- Initial teacher training - and subsequent CPD opportunities - should place a greater emphasis on equality and diversity. The teacher competency framework for initial teacher education (ITE) should cover both how to teach about these themes effectively within the classroom and how to meet pupils’ diverse social and educational needs. The latter should include consideration of a wide range of factors that may inhibit children’s learning i.e. not just disability, but also covering sexuality or gender identity, etc. Anti-bias training should also be considered.
- Likewise, Principals and senior school managers should, as standard, receive training examining equality and diversity, including the underpinning legislation.
- The Department of Education (DE) should adequately resource the co-development of equality and diversity workshops, for staff and pupils, with community organisations working with BAME, LGBTQ+, disabled, and migrant communities.
- Regular guidance should be issued to schools by the DE on equality and diversity.
- Indicators should be introduced into the inspection process that look specifically at how schools are addressing equality and diversity.
- Furthermore, DE should prioritise measures on equality and diversity explicitly in the processes of school improvement.
- Section 75 requirements and the Sex Discrimination Regulations should be applied to schools, alongside other relevant equality legislation.

- Any relevant recommendations on education from international treaty bodies, such as CEDAW, should be adhered to.

### 5.7.3 Community Based Adult Education and Training

The right to education is an important means to achieve gender equality and in enabling women to achieve their full potential. Women's exclusion from participation may be significantly impacted by educational disadvantage which can profoundly restrict their life prospects and wellbeing. Community-based women's education and training has emerged and evolved in response to this educational disadvantage with the express aim of accommodating unmet learner needs.

Community based education and training is vitally important to women in disadvantaged and rural areas reflecting their individual needs. It is a fundamental building block in supporting women to rebuild their confidence and their capability to enter the workplace and is a means to maintaining overall wellbeing.

This type of education and training is generally delivered based on local community needs and takes account of the complexity of women's lives and the barriers they face such as education, course fees and the academic environment. This education and training is provided over the course of a lifetime and is adaptable to changing life circumstances.

For some women (including ethnic minorities and lone parents) the prospect of increased economic participation can depend on the availability of appropriate integrated childcare and access to education/training opportunities at community level. A lack of appropriate integrated childcare and community education acts as a fundamental barrier to the engagement of socio-economically disadvantaged women in education and training and in employment. This is the kind of integrated provision that is provided by the Women's Centre Childcare Fund.

Improved employment prospects for mothers through education and training can translate as improved outcomes for children and the reverse is also true restricting well-being for the mother and also the wider family.

Investing in community-based training and education and integrated childcare is an important factor in enabling women in low-income households to access the training and education they need to make the move into work. Investments in this area help to deliver on a number of key priorities including gender equality, employment support, anti-poverty and child poverty work.



### Recommendation:

- Provide investment for community-based training and education and integrated childcare to enable women in low-income households to access the training and education.

## 5.7.4 Gender Inequality and Apprenticeships NI

A significant barrier to women's full participation with the labour market and economic mobility is rooted in the education system. The apprenticeships programme in Northern Ireland is highly unequal – men's representation in ApprenticeshipsNI programme has steadily increased from 59% in 2013/2014 to 70% in 2019/2020, while women's participation has in turn decreased<sup>121</sup>. Women tend to be older than men when entering the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, as men constitute 76% of those aged 16 to 19 in the programme while women only account for 24%. As well, the programme is very segregated, with majority male participants entering traditionally 'male' apprenticeships like building and construction, engineering, and transport operations and maintenance (99%, 98% and 98% men respectively) and majority female participants entering traditionally 'female' apprenticeships like service enterprises and health and social care (69% and 92% women respectively)<sup>122</sup>.

Not only does the ApprenticeshipsNI programme uphold systemic barriers created by stereotypes and norms, but the public expenditure on the programme disproportionately favours men. Due to the highly segregated nature of the programme, it is clear that there is greater investment in the apprenticeships that are dominated by men and greater investment in apprenticeships for young participants compared to adult participants, the majority of whom are men<sup>123</sup>. According to an ARK working paper, which looked at ApprenticeshipsNI as a gender budgeting case study, the data analysed "suggests a significant 'gendered spend' on apprenticeships, with spend per male apprentice being 53% higher than for female apprenticeships."<sup>124</sup> This disproportionate spend affects participants for the rest of their lives and can inhibit women's economic mobility. The pandemic has shown us how essential sectors like health and social care and service enterprises are to the running of our society – the public expenditure on ApprenticeshipsNI needs to reflect that.

---

<sup>121</sup> ARK Working Papers (February 2021) ['Case Study: Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland'](#)

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

### Recommendations:

- Alter the high-level apprenticeship framework to recognise the contributions of care sector jobs to Northern Ireland's economy.
- Develop short- and long-term SMART targets and performance indicators to tackle occupational gender segregation.
- Consider women-only training programmes for non-traditional sectors, such as construction and engineering, and break down the stereotypes of traditional gender roles at the early-years and school level.

### Social Justice Pillar:

## 5.8 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.

In December 2020, Ofcom released its latest research into the UK's communications infrastructure, Connected Nations 2020. Ofcom's key findings included that around 190,000 UK premises cannot get a decent broadband service from either fixed or fixed wireless, 19,000 of which are in Northern Ireland<sup>125</sup>. Additionally, NI was found to have the lowest level of superfast broadband of all UK regions and coverage of faster broadband was specifically noted to be lower in rural areas.<sup>126</sup>

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.

---

<sup>125</sup> Ofcom (2020), 'Connected Nations Report', <https://bit.ly/2TR4IFX>

<sup>126</sup> Ofcom (2020), 'Connected Nations 2020 Northern Ireland Report' <https://bit.ly/3qITi9i>

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. According to the Office for National Statistics from data gathered in 2018, women aged 75+ were the least likely of all groups to have accessed the internet in the prior three months by a considerable margin (more than 10%).<sup>127</sup> This same research also found that 'internet non-users' were most likely to come from Northern Ireland.

Newcomer, asylum seeking and refugee families also face challenges in accessing affordable internet services, which are critical for them to maintain contact with their extended families and through this, support their health and wellbeing.

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 and any future 'vaccine passport' app. This includes, 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:

- The NI Executive should publish a (co-designed) digital inclusion strategy, which is aligned with other anti-poverty efforts and responsive to the real life issues that emerged during the pandemic. This should complement existing strategies on the expansion of digital technologies within NI and inform all work being undertaken to expand and improve internet access in NI.
- Strengthen access to high quality broadband services across Northern Ireland.
- Work with telecommunications providers to ensure access to affordable broadband services.
- Provide a paper alternative to any future digital 'vaccine passport'.
- Expand and promote more widely the '[Go ON NI](#)' scheme to improve digital literacy in NI.

---

<sup>127</sup> See OFN statistics on '[Exploring the UK's digital divide](#)' available online here. These figures were last updated in 2019.

- 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.

## International Best Practice:

### 5.9 A Caring Economy

Care remains the single most important issue to address in order to support women and strengthen gender equality globally, as well as locally. The impacts described throughout this document are repeated in communities and economies across the world, with women shouldering the majority of additional childcare as well as adult care needs. In the US, up to a quarter of women, including women in senior positions, have left the workforce during the pandemic due to caring commitments<sup>128</sup>, while data from UN Women show that the time women spend on childcare has risen, on average, by five hours to over 30 hours per week, compared to just over 20 hours - an increase of three hours - for men<sup>129</sup>.

A caring economy is therefore critical for a gender equal recovery and 'building back better'. This was first emphasised in a Feminist Recovery Plan launched by the Hawaii Commission on the Status of Women<sup>130</sup> as early as April 2020, and has since been highlighted by organisations from the UN<sup>131,132</sup> to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation<sup>133</sup>. Ultimately, a caring economy seeks to support everyone, in particular the increasing cohort of people in need of care for a dignified life, but it is closely aligned with women's economic empowerment, which is the foundation for gender equality as women gain the ability to make genuine, independent and informed choices. Addressing unpaid care is a core element of a caring economy, but it goes beyond this, focusing on wellbeing, social and environmental impact and value as core outcomes and indicators alongside, or instead of, market value. This reimagines investment, with a focus on sectors that add value to wellbeing and create sustainable

---

<sup>128</sup> McKinsey & Lean In (May 2021) [Women in the workplace 2020](#)

<sup>129</sup> UN Women (November 2020) [Whose time to care?](#)

<sup>130</sup> Hawaii Commission on the Status of Women (April 2020) [Building Bridges, Not Walking on Backs: Hawai'i State Commission on the Status of Women Department of Human Services State of Hawai'i A Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for COVID-19](#)

<sup>131</sup> UN Economic Commission for Europe (November 2020) [Women's economic empowerment and the care economy in the ECE region: The impact of economic and social policies during the COVID-19 response and recovery](#)

<sup>132</sup> UN Women (June 2020) [COVID-19 and the care economy: Immediate action and structural transformation for a gender-responsive recovery](#)

<sup>133</sup> Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (March 2021) [Prioritizing gender equality in the wake of COVID-19](#)

jobs, such as public transport, green infrastructure, education and community development. A caring economy can also be a resilient and green economy, firstly as the demand for care is not directly linked to economic conditions, and secondly, as it emphasises care towards the planet: care is three times less polluting per job created than construction<sup>134</sup>.

The Department of the Economy 'Economic Recovery Action Plan' makes reference to **women in STEM** subjects and fields, which is welcome, provided that this extends through to school curricula and apprenticeships. However, focused action to support women and girls and address gender based norms is needed, as bias against women as well as sexual harassment remain rife across the field, from academia to technology companies. In the US, **women have left the STEM and also medicine workforce in significant numbers during the pandemic, due to caring commitments that employers do not accommodate, and there is also growing evidence that such commitments lead to women being overlooked for promotion**<sup>135</sup>.

It is also vital to consider gender in relation to digitisation and automatising of work, including development of **artificial intelligence (AI) technologies**. **Current estimates suggest that 60 percent of jobs at risk (in the US) from automation and AI are female dominated**, highlighting the importance of reviewing school curricula and public investment in further and higher education to ensure women and girls have access to the fullest range of job opportunities also in the future.<sup>136</sup> Importantly, **care work is one of the areas where a human workforce remains essential, and therefore it is critical to both invest in a caring economy and ensure a living, sustainable wage across the care sector**.

Globally, there is also increasing recognition that climate justice and gender justice are inextricably linked. COVID-19 recovery offers a crucial opportunity to develop policy and practice that underpins both sustainable and equitable policies. The UN has urged for the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to act as the roadmap to recovery, as the SDGs are agreed as a global compact and encompass social justice and equity as well as environmental goals<sup>137</sup>. A caring economy, education for girls and reproductive rights are at the centre of both gender

---

<sup>134</sup> Women's Budget Group (September 2020). [CREATING A CARING ECONOMY: A CALL TO ACTION](#)

<sup>135</sup> The Scientist 10 March 2021 '[Pandemic May "Roll Back" Women's Gains in STEM: NASEM Report](#)'

<sup>136</sup> Newsweek 20 November 2018 '[AI and Automation Will Replace Most Human Workers Because They Don't Have to Be Perfect—Just Better Than You](#)'

<sup>137</sup> UN (October 2020) [COVID-19, Inequalities and Building Back Better](#)

and climate justice; in addition, there needs to be gender parity in discussions and negotiations at all levels, from COP26 to local level.<sup>138,139</sup>

## 6. Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report

Please note, several members of the WPG were appointed to the Department for Communities Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel<sup>140</sup> and developed a comprehensive report. This report addresses several of the issues that are highlighted within the FRP but missing from the Department for Economy Skills Strategy. The full and executive summary reports are available here and we would also recommend that the Department for Economy becomes familiar with both the economy chapter and the education chapter, as both include a significant amount of economic evidence and recommendations that are crucial to any skills strategy for Northern Ireland.

---

<sup>138</sup> See eg. Irish Government (2018) [Women as agents of change: towards a climate and gender justice approach](#)

<sup>139</sup> Morrow, K. L. (2020) "Tackling climate change and gender justice – integral; not optional", *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*, 11(1), pp. 207–230. Available at: <https://opo.iisj.net/index.php/osls/article/view/1215> (Accessed: 19 May 2021).

<sup>140</sup> Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report (2021): <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/report-gender-equality-strategy-expert-advisory-panel>

# WPG Response to Consultation Questions:

- **I am responding to this consultation as: - I am responding to this consultation as:**

'Other'

- **I am responding to this consultation as: - If 'Other' please give details:**

On behalf of the Women's Policy Group Northern Ireland

- **Are you content with the overarching strategic direction set out in the section The Programme for Government, our Economic Vision (a 10x Economy) and the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland?**

'No'

- **If no please provide details:**

As highlighted earlier in this response, there are several areas of importance that have not been considered in the Skills Strategy, which have been expanded on in great details in the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan. Crucially, childcare and caring responsibilities are one of the biggest barriers to women's employment and economic opportunities, and greatly impact the working patterns and sectors that women work in. This is one of the most obvious gaps within this skills strategy.

In addition, the vast issues in relation to gender segregated labour markets, including occupational and industrial segregation, gender pay gaps, motherhood pay penalties, inadequate family leave frameworks, rural access poverty, climate crisis, green jobs, issues with the skills barometer, gender stereotypes influencing career choices and limiting progression and the impact of poverty and austerity on women have not been considered in this strategy.

The issues relating to skills and women's employment are greatly impacted by all of the above, and this skills strategy only focuses on women in relation to STEM and apprenticeships. This is extremely disappointing for a 10 year strategy, and the systemic barriers and discrimination women face in relation to paid and unpaid labour should have been central issues to this strategy.

We would urge the Department for Economy to seriously consider these issues and incorporate them into the Skills Strategy.



- **Do you agree with the need to rationalise the skills landscape by limiting the number of strategies governing separate parts of the skills system, instead focusing on a single, overarching, Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland?**

- **If 'Disagree' please outline your reason(s):**

The WPG understands the need to rationalise the skills landscape by limiting the number of strategies developed on separate parts of the skills economy, and instead focusing on a single, overarching skills strategy for Northern Ireland. However, this Strategy neglects several sectors in Northern Ireland by only focusing on the STEM skills. For instance, the care sector in Northern Ireland, including childcare, is a part of our essential economic infrastructure and is facing great issues in relation to funding. The care sector, excluding childcare, is worth more than £4 billion per year to the Northern Ireland Economy, yet it has not been mentioned in this Strategy. The care sector is so inextricably linked to the success of the rest of our economy, yet it has been often neglected by the Northern Ireland executive, which is evident in the various economic recovery plans and roadmaps to recovery over the past 12 months.

The WPG has long called for action to be taken to recognise the care sector as essential to our economic infrastructure and for adequate investment to develop a caring, green economy. This Skills Strategy totally neglects this and as this strategy will last for a decade, this strategy is likely to exacerbate gender inequality by failing to recognise the systemic barriers women face that limit their choices and ability to participate in paid labour across various sectors.

Therefore, the WPG believes it is essential that a strategic direction for the entire skills landscape is provided in this Strategy, with the aim of achieving a caring, green economy and advancing gender equality.

- **Have you any other comments on the Strategic Context Chapter? - Other Comments on the Strategic Context Chapter**

- **If 'Yes' please provide comments:**

As stated through this response, the WPG has serious concerns about the direction and scope of this Strategy and urge the Department to incorporate the issues highlighted through the overview of the Feminist Recovery Plan into this Strategy. While this strategy does focus on moving people into “better jobs”, there also needs to be considerable investment into sectors that are low-paid, insecure and

predominately made up of women; such as the care sector. Further, as highlighted earlier in this response, the Skills Barometer is not a reliable prediction of Northern Ireland's Skills demand.

The WPG has highlighted major issues relating to occupational gender segregation and other barriers to women's employment that must be addressed in any 10 year Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland.

- **Acknowledging the need for the development of 'SMART' targets, do you agree that the skills supply gap identified under the Skills Barometer's high growth scenario should be placed at the centre of the proposed Strategy?**  
**- Skills Barometer High Growth in Centre of Strategy**
- **If 'Disagree' please outline your reason(s) and if possible any proposals:**

The WPG acknowledges the importance of a high growth scenario, however, without addressing the systemic barriers women face in the labour market in NI, growth will continue to be stunted for a significant proportion of the population and gender inequality will continue to exacerbate. While the WPG does support investment into the STEM sector in NI, women will benefit less from this unless there is adequate investment into the care sector. This is crucial to enable the creation of career pathways for women so they are no longer disenfranchised due to systemic barriers, unpaid domestic labour, low-paid and precarious work.

- **Are you content that the proposals contained in pages 43-56 provide an ambitious and comprehensive approach to 'Addressing Skills Imbalance, Driving Economic Growth'? - Approach to addressing skills imbalance**
- **If 'No' please provide details:**

As stated previously, this Skills Strategy is missing any form of gender analysis of skills in NI and it cannot be considered comprehensive without focus on other essential sectors beyond STEM, such as the care sector.

- **Are there any additional proposals you believe should be considered under the 'Addressing Skills Imbalances, Driving Economic Growth' objective? - Additional Proposals under Addressing Skills Imbalances, Driving Economic Growth**
- **If 'Yes' please provide details:**

The WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan provides a comprehensive roadmap of policy recommendations on addressing skills imbalances, barriers to paid employment, gender segregated labour markets and much more throughout the economic justice pillar, as highlighted earlier in this response. We strongly believe that the WPG recommendations from the Feminist Recovery Plan should be incorporated into the Skills Strategy.

- **Are you content that the proposals contained in pages 57-75 provide an ambitious and comprehensive approach to ‘Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning’? - Agree Approach to creating a culture of lifelong learning**
- **If 'No' please provide details:**

The WPG firmly supports the need for adequate investment into lifelong learning in Northern Ireland. As highlighted earlier in this response, the Women's Centres across Northern Ireland used to be able to provide a wide range of adult education programmes supporting women. However, the women's sector has faced significant funding cuts over the past decade, and many women's centres have been unable to provide the wide range of adult education programmes that they used to provide. The WPG would urge the Department to provide significant investment into the women's centres to allow for adult education programmes to be developed to support marginalised women.

Further, the WPG has issues with the Skills Barometer that have been highlighted throughout this response which also applies here. Further, we have made recommendations throughout this response for the implementation of gender budgeting which we believe should be incorporated into the strategy.

- **Are there any additional proposals you believe should be considered under the ‘Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning’ objective? - Additional proposals to Lifelong Learning objective**
- **If 'Yes' please outline your proposals:**

While the WPG acknowledges that Commitment 16 calls for the expansion of childcare support to allow parents to engage in lifelong learning, this falls far short of recognising the extent of the impact of unpaid labour and family and home commitments on women's ability to engage in formal paid labour and adult learning programmes.

We would call on the Department to fully implement the recommendations from the WPG feminist recovery plan, specifically, the need for a specific Women's Employment

Strategy which could support this skills strategy over the next 10 years. Further, commitment 21 needs to include small businesses, as 99% of businesses in Northern Ireland are considered “small-to-medium”.

- **Do you agree with the approach that an expert panel is appointed to develop a specific Digital Skills Action Plan for Northern Ireland? - Specific Digital Skills Action Plan required**

- **If 'Disagree' please provide details:**

Yes - we agree that an expert panel should be developed. The WPG has made several recommendations in relation to digital access poverty and we would call for the expert panel to include experts from the women's sector, voluntary and community sector and trade unions.

- **Have you any other comments on the Strategic Goals and Policy Objectives? - Strategic Goals and Policies**

- **If 'Yes' please provide details:**

As stated several times, we do not agree with the overall direction of this Skills Strategy as we urge the Department to incorporate the various recommendations made by WPG in the Feminist Recovery Plan.

- **Do you agree that the first two 'policy enablers': are a useful and appropriate approach to improving the development and implementation of the skills policy in Northern Ireland? - Policy Enablers are correct approach**

- **If 'Disagree' please details:**

The WPG acknowledges that cross-departmental work is needed for the implementation of this strategy. However, the WPG is also concerned that the Department did not acknowledge the report published by the Department for Communities on behalf of the Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel, which provided various recommendations that are relevant to this Skills strategy but have been overlooked.

We strongly recommend that the Department implements Gender Budgeting, creates a Women's Employment Strategy and incorporates the various recommendations made by the WPG into the deliverance of the Strategy and associated action plans. Further, representatives from the women's sector, trade unions and equality organisations should be included in the make-up of the Northern Ireland Skills Council mentioned in Commitment 28.

- **Do you agree that 'Investment in the Skills System' should be prioritised?**  
- Investment prioritised
- **Please elaborate on this response if possible:**

We agree that 'Investment in the Skills System' should be prioritised, but we want to ensure that the Department is investing in diverse skills. The Report and the Strategy should reflect this – not a sole focus on STEM and digital skills.

ENDS

For questions or queries regarding this consultation response, please contact Rachel Powell, Women's Sector Lobbyist, Women's Resource and Development Agency - [rachel.powell@wrda.net](mailto:rachel.powell@wrda.net)

WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan 2020 - available [here](#)

WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan Relaunch: One Year On 2021 - available [here](#)

WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan - Department for Economy Bespoke Report - available [here](#)

WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan - Economic Justice Pillar Summary 2020 - available [here](#)

All other WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan reports, briefings, summaries, webinars and more are available [here](#).