



# **Women's** **Policy Group NI**

## COVID-19 FEMINIST RECOVERY PLAN

**Committee for Communities**

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## Abstract

The recommendations contained in this report are specific to the Department for Communities.

Although some recommendations in this report are currently within the remit of other departments (e.g. Childcare is DE, Mental Health is DoH, Green Economy is DEARA), we believe that an inter-departmental approach is essential to tackling the issues raised in this report.

Therefore, we have included some recommendations that, while under the remit of another department, should be brought to the attention of the Department for Communities.

We appreciate that the Department for Communities remit is broad and that it is undertaking work on the social inclusion strategies, but we need to ensure that the Department has all of the relevant evidence, regarding these strategies, from the Feminist Recovery Plan.

# Women's Policy Group NI

## Women's Policy Group: Introduction

The Women's Policy Group (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 and human rights and equality organisations.

The WPG uses our group expertise to lobby to influence the development and implementation of policies affecting women. The WPG is endorsed as a coalition of expert voices that advocates for women in Northern Ireland on a policy level. This group has collective expertise on protected characteristics and focus on identifying the intersectional needs of all women; in line with international human rights mechanisms.

The WPG launched the original Feminist Recovery Plan (FRP) in 2020<sup>1</sup>, which provided a comprehensive overview of the severe impact of the pandemic on groups from protected characteristics, particularly women. The WPG provided additional and updated evidence and recommendations in its relaunched WPG Feminist Recovery Plan, published in July 2021<sup>2</sup>. This relaunched version was accompanied by a supplementary research report, based on findings from WPG primary research, titled "Putting Women's Voices at the Core."<sup>3</sup> The Feminist Recovery Plan covers a wide range of topics and these are organised under the following pillars: **Economic Justice, Health, Social Justice, Cultural Pillar, Brexit and a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland and International Best Practice.**

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<sup>1</sup> Women's Policy Group (2020) [WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan](#).

<sup>2</sup> Women's Policy Group (2021) [WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On](#).

<sup>3</sup> Women's Policy Group (2021) WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan Supplementary Research Report: [Putting Women's Voices at the Core](#).

## The Impact of COVID-19: Overview

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented challenge across the UK. It has put in sharp focus the value and importance of care work, paid and unpaid, and highlighted the essential nature of often precarious and almost always low paid retail work. Women undertake the majority of this work, and women will bear a particular brunt of this crisis; economically, socially and in terms of health. The crisis affects men and women differently, and in many cases deepens the inequalities women experience on an everyday basis<sup>4</sup>. The emergency action required, and any recovery programme put in place, must meaningfully take into consideration the institutionalised inequalities that exist within Northern Ireland and co-develop a roadmap forward with the communities affected.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is worsened for women from particular backgrounds, for instance, black and minority ethnic women, disabled women, women with caring responsibilities, and LGBTQI+ women. Commitments to introduce a number of strategies to protect marginalised groups were upheld during the year, with work initiated on a suite of social inclusion strategies including a gender equality strategy, an LGBTQI+ strategy, an anti-poverty strategy and a strategy on disability<sup>5</sup>. In addition, Invest NI published a call for evidence for a new Investment Strategy<sup>6</sup>. However, these crucial strategies remain outstanding.



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<sup>4</sup> See Women's Resource and Development Agency Reports on Gender Inequality in NI in 2020 <https://bit.ly/3zS2WET>; Brexit and the Impact on Women in NI 2019 <https://bit.ly/3gWjO5l>; Disabled Women and Discrimination 2019 <https://bit.ly/3qktuKC>; Childcare: A Women's Issue <https://bit.ly/3j2tnlz>.

<sup>5</sup> Details available on the Department for Communities website, [Social Inclusion](#) section

<sup>6</sup> Strategic Investment Board for Northern Ireland (2020) [The new Investment Strategy](#)

## Key Findings from WPG Primary Research

As part of the relaunch of the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan in July 2021, the Women's Policy Group undertook primary research to explore the impact of the pandemic on women in Northern Ireland. This research included conducting one-to-one interviews and launching a survey that invited anonymous written submissions on the topic of experiences during the pandemic.

In total, over 150 women contributed to this research. The findings from this research paint a stark picture of women's experiences in Northern Ireland relating to health, employment, poverty, disability, racism, care work, violence against women and more.

### Key findings from survey:

- 82.1% of respondents said that their mental health had declined during the pandemic,
- 81.1% of respondents who designated as carers said that their caring responsibilities had increased during the pandemic,
- 58.4% of respondents had experienced either one or multiple of the following: domestic abuse, stalking, harassment, hate crime and assault,
- 57.9% of respondents said that their physical health had declined during the pandemic
- 92.3% of respondents who attended school in Northern Ireland said they did not feel they had received an adequate relationships and sexuality education (RSE),
- 50% of respondents from an ethnic minority community said that they had experienced issues in attempting to access health services,
- 65.8% of respondents from a rural area described their internet connection as 'not stable',
- 98.5% of respondents said that they would or might support the introduction of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland,
- 55.1% of respondents said that they were concerned about the impact of Brexit on women's rights in Northern Ireland.

Our full primary research findings are available in the supplementary WPG Feminist Recovery Plan report: [Putting Women's Voices at the Core](#).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Women's Policy Group (2021) WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan Supplementary Research Report: [Putting Women's Voices at the Core](#).

# 1. Economic Justice Pillar

## Overview

The Economic Justice Pillar of the WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan highlights the disproportionate economic impact of the pandemic on women, and illustrates how this impact has been exacerbated by pre-existing gender inequalities in our society. This includes an exploration of its impact on women's employment, the gender pay gap, flexible working, parental leave, discrimination, care work, occupational segregation, women's poverty, universal credit, women's debt, welfare mitigations, childcare, rural women, climate justice and the economic impacts of paramilitarism. This pillar offers a wide-ranging evidence base which addresses these topics at the international, UK and Northern Ireland levels.

Women are more likely than men to be employed in precarious, low-paid and part-time work. 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 being particularly vulnerable. Women are disproportionately represented in sectors such as the care and childcare sector, the hospitality sector and the retail sector. These sectors have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic, causing women to have been furloughed at higher rates than men<sup>9</sup>.

Substantive gender segregation remains in the labour market, with men continuing to dominate in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as manufacturing, construction and STEM. 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. Whilst the overall gender pay gap is the lowest in the UK, women still earn on average around 9.6% less than men in Northern Ireland<sup>10</sup>. 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<sup>11</sup>.

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

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

<sup>9</sup> UK Government Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme Statistics October 2020: <https://bit.ly/3xOfouJ>

<sup>10</sup> See PWC (2020): <https://pwc.to/3xYZXsT>

<sup>11</sup> Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report (March 2021): <https://bit.ly/2SRZcmu>

work. Roughly 30% of all women aged 16-64 are considered 'economically inactive' compared to 22% of men; 34% 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 (only 6%).

Gender inequality is amplified for women in rural areas due to Access Poverty<sup>12</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 in the labour market; particularly in rural areas<sup>13</sup>. 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.

Women are also more likely to be recipients of social welfare, including universal credit and child tax benefits, and are more likely to be single parents. Women have lower financial wellbeing, have fewer retirement plans and smaller pension pots than men as well as being less likely to save regularly (56%) compared to men (63%).<sup>14</sup> More women (52%) have never put their money into an investment product compared to 37% of men.<sup>15</sup> These factors mean that women are more vulnerable to poverty and debt. Job losses and the need to provide increasing levels of unpaid care as a result of the pandemic are likely to increase poverty and dependence on social security benefits, especially for women.

The Northern Ireland Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report<sup>16</sup>, released in March 2021, provides a comprehensive overview of key indicators of women's economic standing in Northern Ireland and the urgent need for gender disaggregated data by official agencies. The Executive's failure to acknowledge or take steps to mitigate the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women, to date, suggests that women will bear the brunt of this crisis, as was the case following the financial crisis in 2008<sup>17,18</sup>. It is crucial both for women's wellbeing, and long-term economic recovery, that policy decisions to follow the pandemic do not further harm women's economic standing.

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<sup>12</sup> Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation, DAERA

<sup>13</sup> Rural Women's Manifesto Rural Women Speak NIRWN June 2015

<sup>14</sup> Money & Pensions Service, <https://bit.ly/3gUWogo>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid (n4).

<sup>17</sup> Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes, Richard Cracknell, Richard Keen, Commons Briefing Papers SN06758, December 2017 <https://bit.ly/3wQvrRN>

<sup>18</sup> Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives, Women's Regional Consortium, March 2019 <https://bit.ly/35OWtqe>



## Recommendations

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

- Include financial penalties for employers who flout the law by failing to report gender pay gap data.
- 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.
- 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.
- Maternity pay should be paid at earnings related rate and both maternity leave and earnings-related pay should be available with eligibility restrictions removed.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

## 1.2 Gender Segregated Labour Markets and Care Work

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>19</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

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<sup>19</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>

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.
- 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.

The WPG also supports the below medium-term and longer-term recommendations from the UK Women's Budget Group<sup>20</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.

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<sup>20</sup> UKWBG (May 2020), 'Briefing from the UK Women's Budget Group: Easing Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women', (available online): <https://bit.ly/3qhxyzPW>

Recommendations from Carers Week Report<sup>21</sup> which we endorse include:

- 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.
- 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

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<sup>21</sup> Carers Week (2020), <https://bit.ly/3qiOrFQ>

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:

- 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.
- 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.

We support the following recommendations from Tax Justice UK:

- 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.

### 1.3 Women's Poverty and Austerity

- The level of Child Benefit should be increased by at least £10 per week and an extra amount of at least £10 per week should be added to the child element within Universal Credit and Tax Credits. These payments would help families on the lowest incomes stay out of poverty/debt, reflect the additional costs facing parents and provide specific support to families with children who have been so impacted by the pandemic.
- As Universal Credit is one of the key benefits for those who have lost their jobs or suffered significantly reduced income as a result of the pandemic, a range of changes are required to help ensure it provides better support:
  - The Government should not cut the £20 increase to Universal Credit but should instead keep this lifeline. This would go some way to making sure that Universal Credit provides a decent income for people to live on and give families the stability they need.
  - The Government should remove the five-week wait or, if this is not possible, Advance Payments should be converted from loans to non-repayable grants to ensure people are supported to get through the five-week wait without risking hardship or debt.
  - In Northern Ireland, consideration should be given to providing an automatic grant from the Universal Credit Contingency Fund for all those claiming Universal Credit for the first time, reducing the devastating impact of the five-week wait, as suggested by the Cliff Edge Coalition.
  - Amend the Universal Credit Regulations so that Maternity Allowance is treated in the same way as Statutory Maternity Pay.
  - Make split payments of Universal Credit the default option.
  - Enable childcare costs to be paid directly to childcare providers. This would alleviate the problem of prohibitive upfront costs, help claimants with budgeting, and give providers much-needed certainty of income as well as reducing the risk of fraud and error.
- The two-child limit in Tax Credits and Universal Credit should be scrapped, which would help to protect against predicted increases in child poverty as a result of the pandemic.
  - If the two-child limit remains, consideration should be given in Northern Ireland to providing an additional mitigation payment

to families who are impacted by the two-child limit as suggested by the Cliff Edge Coalition.

- Scrap the Benefit Cap which disproportionately impacts on women and BAME families and is likely to impact many more people as a result of the pandemic.
- The Department for Communities is to be commended for extending the existing mitigation payments for the Benefit Cap and Bedroom Tax in Northern Ireland, however further action must be taken in relation to mitigations:
  - Government must legislate to extend the existing mitigations and close the loopholes around the Benefit Cap and Bedroom Tax urgently.
  - The pandemic makes it clear that an urgent review of mitigation payments is needed to ensure a strengthened safety net to prevent and alleviate child poverty and homelessness.
  - Government should work to develop targeted mitigations to specifically help those most impacted by welfare reform including women, lone parents and disabled people as suggested by NIHRC.<sup>22</sup> This could include implementing the Cost of Work Allowance, payments for low income families with young children and payments for households with disabled people. This would also help to benefit those most impacted by the pandemic including women, low-income families and BAME families.
  - Ensure any underspend in the mitigations package is ring-fenced for anti-poverty work.
- Introduce a new non-taxable weekly Child Payment for all 0-4 year olds and for 5-15 year olds in receipt of free school meals.
- Increase the funding available to the Universal Credit Contingency Fund, use it to make automatic payments to new claimants impacted by the 5-week wait, work to increase awareness/uptake of the Fund and make it easier to apply.
- Extend the £20 per week increase to Universal Credit to those in receipt of legacy benefits who have been denied this much needed increase since March 2020.
- Increase the basic level of Carer's Allowance and consider a further supplement of £20 a week to match the rise in Universal Credit as suggested by Carers UK.<sup>23</sup> This would particularly benefit women who provide higher levels of care.

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<sup>22</sup> NI Human Rights Commission (November 2019) <https://bit.ly/3qhxRq0>

<sup>23</sup> Carers Week (2020), <https://bit.ly/3qiOrFQ>



- The Department of Education is to be commended for committing to pay free school meals for all eligible children during all school holidays until April 2022 but the Government should make a permanent commitment to this so that no child in Northern Ireland ever suffers from holiday hunger.
- The welfare reform agenda and the COVID-19 pandemic has created a crisis situation where women need more help in the form of support, education and advice. However, support services for women are under serious threat from funding cuts, which is compounded by fears that Brexit will also mean the loss of valuable EU funding. Government should ensure proper recognition of, and support for, the role of community-based women-only provision in addressing women's vulnerability and poverty in rural and disadvantaged areas. This should include a commitment to increase and provide longer-term funding for women's organisations to enable them to continue and develop the vital services they provide in these increasingly difficult times.

#### 1.4 Increasing Financial Hardship and Debt

- Households struggling with arrears and debt should be provided with strong protections against unaffordable repayment demands and housing insecurity. Government should consider introducing further protections on a range of credit repayments, benefit debt repayments (including Advance Payments) and in housing (including mortgage holidays, increases in Local Housing Allowance rates, extending notice to quit periods, etc). This would provide a sustainable route back to normality over a longer-term period for households whose incomes may recover but who are left with a backlog of debt.
- No-one should lose their home as a result of the pandemic. Government should provide an emergency support package to help private renters clear rent arrears as a result of the pandemic and prevent people losing their homes. This could include grants, no-interest loans and protection from eviction.
- Increase the funding available for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) and change how they are administered to provide greater levels of support for renters in financial difficulties and arrears.
- Increase Local Housing Allowance rates in line with local rents for those in receipt of Housing Benefit or the housing costs element of Universal Credit to provide greater financial support and ensure they keep pace with increases in housing costs.

- Flexible terms are needed once payment holidays end to prevent a 'cliff edge' for people who have to start paying back their debts. Government should work with stakeholders to develop a package of protections for those negatively affected by COVID-19 which allows them a safe route out of difficulty including allowing for repayments to be made at an affordable level without increasing their debt or incurring poor credit ratings.
- Many people will have turned to high-cost credit to make ends meet since the crisis began. Financial support through the benefits system and through crisis payments is central to preventing crisis borrowing but the need for alternatives to high-cost credit is more pressing than ever. Government should work with charities, financial institutions and other investors to introduce or underwrite the development of schemes to provide low or no interest loans to help those on the lowest incomes access affordable credit. This should include support from the government for a no-interest loan for essential items in the form of a reformed Social Fund which would benefit many people on the lowest incomes.
- Providing short-term relief on debt repayments and evictions is not enough and in many cases will simply defer arrears until a later date. Both StepChange and Citizens Advice have recommended that in order to be effective in tackling the debt crisis as a result of the pandemic, the government must provide financial support. StepChange have recommended the establishment of a central fund to enable grants for those households negatively impacted by COVID-19 to address arrears and debts accumulated to pay for essential costs during the crisis. The fund should be reserved for the worst affected where realistic chances of repayment may not exist. Citizens Advice have recommended one-off or time-limited financial support for arrears built up due to COVID-19 with the cost of relief shared fairly between government, creditors and individuals. This could include grants, payment matching or government-backed loans.
- As previously recommended in Section 1.4 a series of reforms to Universal Credit are needed to protect people from financial hardship and debt including ending the five-week wait, converting Advance Payments to grants rather than loans or in Northern Ireland making non-repayable grants from the Contingency Fund to those claiming Universal Credit for the first time through the Contingency Fund.
- Provide greater financial resilience for those on the lowest incomes by making the £20 increase to the standard allowance of Universal Credit permanent and extending it to legacy benefits.

- Government should also consider providing greater support for low-income families with children, particularly for lone parents, whose finances have been so impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As previously recommended in Section 1.4 this could include increasing the level of Child Benefit, adding an extra amount to the child element within Universal Credit and Tax Credits and introducing a new Child Payment for those in receipt of free school meals.
- As previously recommended in Section 1.4 existing welfare mitigations in Northern Ireland should be extended and strengthened to include new challenges such as Universal Credit (which has seen significant increases in claimant numbers as a result of the pandemic). This would help to ensure that those on the lowest incomes did not slide deeper into poverty and debt.
- Government should increase the budget for Discretionary Support, remove the income ceiling, extend the eligibility criteria and make more payments as grants rather than loans so that more people can access this help.
- Government must address the issue of historic benefit debt repayment to reduce the impact of this debt that is leaving many Universal Credit claimants living on less than the standard allowance and therefore on extremely low incomes. Government should either write off this debt or significantly slow down repayments.
- Sufficient funding should be made available to debt advice agencies to not only continue with their free debt advice services but also to expand in order to meet increasing demand as a result of the pandemic.
- Government should acknowledge and support the role of community-based women-only provision in addressing women's poverty and financial vulnerability in disadvantaged and rural areas. This should include a commitment to increase and provide longer-term funding for grassroots women's organisations to enable them to continue and develop the vital services they provide to financially vulnerable women and their families.

## 1.5 Childcare

- 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>24</sup> in terms of need, impact and value for money.

## 1.6 Rural Women

- 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.
- 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>25</sup> rolls out such as; opening up wi-fi in publicly funded facilities.
- Rural women are engaged in future rural development policy planning and development.
- Rural women have dedicated rural development resourcing that takes account of gender differentials and Covid-19 impacts.

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<sup>24</sup> Evaluation of Regional Support Arrangements for the Voluntary and Community Sector, Final Report, June 2015, DSD and DARD

<sup>25</sup> See Strategic Investment Board: Project Stratum, <https://bit.ly/3higrP6>

- NI continues post Brexit to learn from EU policy development and innovation in order to replicate what is advantageous to NI.
- NI Executive work quickly on ensuring we have a future Rural Development policy that supports vibrant, gender equal, rural communities.
- Government to view organisations in this sector in a similar light to private and public businesses and employees, providing financial support to sustain their viability.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- The Programme for Government, Budgets and future policies take account of rural women's needs.
- Ensure that all GP practices are adequately resourced to provide timely access to counselling for everyone who needs it.
- Ensure that nobody waits longer than 28 days for a routine appointment and no longer than 2 days for an urgent one.
- Provide people with options for accessing counselling – in their local GP practice or through the Talking Therapy Hubs run by the Trusts.
- Mental Health data that is both gender-disaggregated and takes account of rural and urban experiences.

### 1.7 A Feminist & Human Rights-Based Housing Recovery

- Adopt a 50/50 social/private quota for new housing developments, enshrining the creation of more social housing in law.

- Introduce progressive taxation on multiple-property ownership, targeting landlord monopolies and multinational investors scooping up housing stock.
- Launch a wide-ranging property buy-back scheme, funded through taxation on multiple-property-ownership.
- Introduce targeted rent controls across Northern Ireland, particularly in urban and rapidly urbanising areas where rent is steadily climbing.
- Adopt a “Housing First” policy to support homeless populations, focusing on providing housing and socio-economic stability as a means to addressing the other issues they may be experiencing.
- Improve & expand council powers to reprimand landlords/estate agents for maintaining unsuitable accommodation (i.e. those where tenants are living in unsuitable conditions or the property is not upkept).
- Establish an expert inquiry into housing reform in Northern Ireland, with the aim of moving to a de-commodified housing system.

## 1.8 A Feminist Green Economy

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

### *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 compensate 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>26</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.

Several members of the WPG were 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.<sup>27</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.

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<sup>26</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.

<sup>27</sup> Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report (2021), <https://bit.ly/2SRZcmu> p.171



- 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 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.

## 2. Health Pillar

### Overview

The Health Pillar of the WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan highlights the disproportionate health impact of the pandemic on women, particularly in relation to women's mental health, maternal health, waiting lists, abortion access, disabled women, trans healthcare, care work and health inequalities faced by ethnic minority women.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and consequent lockdowns, have had a severe impact on women's mental health. Over the period 27 January to 7 March 2021, more than 4 in 10 (43%) women aged 16 to 29 years experienced depressive symptoms, compared with 26% of men of the same age<sup>28</sup>. Anti-depressant prescription rates in Northern Ireland are significantly higher than the rest of the UK. During the year 2020/21 anti-depressants were dispensed to nearly 1 in 5 people in Northern Ireland (over 357,000 people), and 63.7% of these were women.

The Women's Budget Group<sup>29</sup> found that being younger and female was associated with significantly greater levels of stress, anxiety and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic than for other groups. Every week, women in the UK spend 5 more hours on housework and 10 more hours on childcare than men during lockdown. This increased housework and childcare is associated with higher levels of psychological distress for women<sup>30</sup>. The LGBTQ+ community (particularly trans individuals), disabled women, Traveller women and black and minority ethnic women<sup>31</sup> are also at increased risk of experiencing mental health issues.

A 2019 review of Northern Ireland waiting lists found that a person in Northern Ireland is 48 times more likely than a person in Wales to wait more than a year for care. This has particular impacts for marginalised groups, such as trans people. Currently, Northern Ireland has some of the worst waiting lists and worst future prospects for access to gender-affirming care of any part of the UK and Ireland. Issues around waiting lists in Northern

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<sup>28</sup> Office for National Statistics (May 2021) <https://bit.ly/35JuiPO>

<sup>29</sup> Women's Budget Group, 'Lessons Learned: Where Women Stand in 2021' (January 2021) <https://bit.ly/3vQ268K>

<sup>30</sup> Xue, B. and McMunn, A., (August 2020) Gender differences in the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on unpaid care work and psychological distress in the UK, UCL Research Department of Epidemiology & Public Health, <https://bit.ly/3vRshM0>

<sup>31</sup> Institute for Conflict Research (December 2015) 'Walking this thin line Report: Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Experiences of Mental Health Wellbeing in N.Ireland', <https://bit.ly/2TYhkei>

Ireland have inevitably been exacerbated by backlogs due to the pandemic. Since 22nd October 2019, new legislation decriminalised abortion in Northern Ireland. However, instead of access becoming mainstreamed within the health service, over a year after the regulations were laid, the Minister for Health has failed to commission the services required by law. Compared with the UK and Ireland, Northern Ireland remains the only place where a safe, cost effective and practical method of abortion care has been denied to individuals seeking abortions.

Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK with no Mother and Baby Unit (MBU) and women who need hospital care must be admitted to a general psychiatric ward and be separated from their babies. Northern Ireland has lagged behind the rest of the UK for too long with its perinatal mental health care, it is essential that women here receive the same equality of care. Within the UK, Black women are four times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth compared to white women, and Asian ethnic backgrounds face twice the risk<sup>32,33</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened these disparities<sup>34</sup>.

Members of the migrant community, particularly those without secure immigration status, may be put off from accessing healthcare for themselves or their families during COVID-19 because of the continued operation of 'hostile environment' measures, which have the NHS sharing migrant data with the Home Office. This impacts some of the most vulnerable women in society such as pregnant women, victims of trafficking and domestic violence and persons living with HIV.

In Northern Ireland, only 7% of disabled people are employed, but those who are face low-paid work and underemployment. Disabled women earn 22.1% less than non-disabled men and 11.8% less than disabled men. 26% of households with a disabled person live in poverty, compared to 22% of households overall. It is estimated that disabled women will have lost 13% of their annual net income by 2021, due to cumulative tax-benefit changes and austerity<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Hannah Summers (January 2021), 'Black women in the UK four times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth', <https://bit.ly/3jsN1Y3>

<sup>33</sup> British Medical Journal (January 2021), 'Disparity in maternal death rates because of ethnicity is "unacceptable"', BMJ 2021;372:n152, <https://bit.ly/2UUbg7h>

<sup>34</sup> MBRRACE-UK (December 2020), 'Saving Lives: Improving Mothers' Care', <https://bit.ly/3dsKXvv>

<sup>35</sup> Women's Budget Group (2018), 'Disabled Women and Austerity', (available online): <https://bit.ly/3qouNsi>

## Recommendations

### 2.1 Mental Health Concerns due to COVID-19

- Increase the budget for mental health services as a result of greater demands arising from the pandemic.
- Developing pandemic-related mental health policies to take into account those who have been most impacted including women, young people, those on low incomes, BAME and LGBTQ+ people and carers. Government should devise policies that consider the mental health impacts on these groups and provide funding and services to specifically improve their mental health and economic wellbeing.
- Health and Social Care Trusts should ensure carers in Northern Ireland are informed of their right to a Carer's Assessment so that carers are alerted to the mental health supports available to them and to help ensure that those at most risk of poor wellbeing and burn out get the support they need.
- Identify carers as a priority group requiring emotional support services and develop agreed pathways for them to access mental health interventions.
- Reducing poverty through significant investment in welfare and debt prevention to ensure people have sufficient income to live on both during the crisis and into the future as society gradually emerges from the pandemic and its longer-term impacts - see sections 1.4-1.5.
- Improving access to culturally competent sexual health services (reducing STI/HIV anxiety).
- Decommodifying housing and ensuring quick access to alternative accommodation in cases of DV/SV/homo- + trans-phobia from housemates and family.
- Improving cultural competency within drug cessation services, safe injection rooms, etc.
- Removing crisis/mental health response from PSNI duties, developing emergency community healthcare support for mental health crisis situations.
- Adequate long-term funding must be provided to the wider women's sector and to the network of women's centres across Northern Ireland for their work on mental health issues. Funding and support must be increased so that they can continue, develop and strengthen their work in relation to mental health which has seen increased demand as a result of the pandemic and which is unlikely to diminish for some considerable time.

## 2.2 Women with Caring Responsibilities and Dependents

- Urgent action is needed to address the increasing mental health concerns of carers.
- The needs of carers' health should be a priority in any recovery planning in Northern Ireland.

## 2.3 Health Impacts of Austerity on Women

In the context of an upcoming recession due to COVID-19, we support recommendations from the British Medical Association to increase investment in social protection systems - such as unemployment programmes, housing support and income maintenance - to counter the projected recession and austerity and to;

- Increase investment in healthcare and public health services in the short and long-term, including adequate funding for evidence based preventative and early intervention services.

## 2.4 Disabled Women

- Ensure that programmes and policies dealing with the elimination of exploitation, violence and abuse contain specific actions for disabled women.
- Urgently address the issue of disabled women being denied the same access to maternal health services, including sexual and reproductive health, as other women.
- Promote the employment of disabled women in all sectors, and support entrepreneurship development.
- Urgently review the Access to Work Scheme to improve disabled women's ability to overcome structural barriers to employment.
- Introduce staff education programmes, based on the social model of disability, to effect attitudinal change in all sectors; but particularly health and education sectors.
- Urgently address and reform the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) application process, Universal Credit and Welfare Reform, to prevent any further discrimination against disabled women in Northern Ireland.
- Increase mental health funding to be allocated for those facing intersectional discrimination such as disabled people, people of colour, members of the LGBTQI+ community and those on low incomes.

- Develop an inquiry into accessibility and independent living during the pandemic and implement accessibility measures to support all forms of independent living including BSL/ISL interpretation with all public provisions, accessible online bookings for essential services such as supermarkets and more.
- Ensure COVID-19 information is available in accessible formats such as Easy read, Large print, and in BSL/ISL and in various languages.
- Ensure all essential public broadcasts and NI Assembly updates are translated into BSL and ISL. Ensure people are aware of the alternative services, volunteer programmes, and how to access them including those not able to access the internet.
- There should be intersectional strategies for future emergencies on the groups that share protected characteristics so that disabled people impacted will not be deprived of food, similar to that of a crisis zone.
- Safeguarding of volunteers and carers should be reviewed to ensure that disabled people are not put at further risk.
- Ensure personal assistants and family carers are allowed to accompany disabled people with other physical or communication support needs at any time they are in hospital.
- Inquiry into the deaths of disabled people during the pandemic.

## 3. Social Justice Pillar

### Overview

The Social Justice Pillar of the WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan highlights a range of social justice issues that disproportionately impact women, particularly women from marginalised communities such as trans women, ethnic minority women, LGBTQ+ women, Traveller women and disabled women. Topics covered in this Pillar include racial justice, women in politics, public life, peacebuilding and decision-making, restorative justice, the digital divide, no recourse to public funds, and women in prisons.

Racism is not a problem confined to the USA or Great Britain but is an issue that is highly prevalent in Northern Ireland. In 2016-17, statistics show that racially motivated hate crime overtook sectarian hate crimes<sup>36</sup> for the first time in the history of Northern Ireland. More recently, the PSNI recorded 936 racist incidents including 626 racist crimes<sup>37</sup> between April 2019 and March 2020. The issue of policing is inextricably linked to the matter of racial justice and has been brought to the forefront in the Northern Ireland context with the disproportionate policing of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020.

Women in Northern Ireland are under-represented in all areas of politics, public life, peacebuilding and decision-making. The COVID-19 crisis with its particular impacts on women's income, socioeconomic independence and increased caring responsibilities has compounded barriers to women's involvement in peacebuilding and decision-making processes. In the context of COVID-19 recovery planning, it is imperative that women are included in decision-making across all departments in Northern Ireland.

The UK government has committed to implementing the principles of UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland. However, dispute over the legal status of the conflict in Northern Ireland continues to preclude application of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security to the region in full. Women need to be heard and have an equal role in peacebuilding and leadership at all levels, in line with the principles of UNSCR 1325. However, extensive

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<sup>36</sup> Police Service of Northern Ireland Trends in Hate Motivated Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2017/18 Annual Bulletin published 31 October 2018, p.6: <https://bit.ly/3vRKpoY>

<sup>37</sup> Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland Update to 31 March 2020 published 15 May 2020, p.4: <https://bit.ly/3wWgehW>

consultation with women<sup>38</sup> has found that this is far from being the case. Restorative justice must be entirely victim-led and should only be an option in cases of “low-level” crimes, and not in cases of domestic abuse. Restorative justice, even if victim-led, is not appropriate if there are power disparities between participants, and in the case of a victim and abuser, power resides with the abuser by the nature of the offence.

NI has the lowest level of superfast broadband in the UK and access to digital technologies remains limited in the region, primarily due to uneven broadband access and coverage, especially in rural areas<sup>39</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the gendered nature of the digital divide, with reports of mothers struggling to support their children’s education on mobile phones or on a single family laptop. Newcomer, asylum seeking and refugee families also face distinct challenges in accessing affordable internet services, which are critical for them to maintain contact with their extended families and to support their health and wellbeing.

The ‘No Recourse to Public funds’ condition means that migrants in the UK face barriers in accessing social security. Since 2012, a ‘NRPF condition’ has been imposed on nearly all migrants granted the right to live or work in the UK (around 1.376 million people<sup>40</sup>). This policy disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups such as single parent households, pregnant women and people subject to domestic violence, leaving them without the safety net of social welfare and throwing families into destitution.<sup>41</sup>

Rates of women’s imprisonment have been increasing since 2000 and continue to rise significantly. Evidence suggests that most women prisoners are imprisoned for low-level offences<sup>42</sup>. Women in prisons in Northern Ireland are predominantly non-violent offenders and tend to commit “victimless crimes” such as theft (which accounts for 30% of women’s offences in Northern Ireland). These crimes are often survival-based and connected to poverty, homelessness and mental health issues. The WPG is also deeply concerned about the detention of trafficking victims and asylum-seeking refugee and migrant women in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>38</sup> Hinds, B and Donnelly D (2014) Women, Peace and Security: Women's Rights and Gender Equality - Strategic Guide and Toolkit, <https://bit.ly/2TY2GUo>

<sup>39</sup> OFcom (2020), ‘Connected Nations 2020 Northern Ireland Report’ <https://bit.ly/3qITi9j>

<sup>40</sup> The Migration Observatory (June 2020), Between a rock and a hard place: the Covid-19 crisis and migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), <https://bit.ly/3zON9qt>

<sup>41</sup> Maternity Action (June 2020) Migrant Women, No Recourse to Public Funds and the Pandemic, <https://bit.ly/2Uv5eKa>

<sup>42</sup> Department of Justice (2019), ‘The Northern Ireland Prison Population 2018/19’, <https://bit.ly/2SXzMDI>



## Recommendations

### 3.1 Digital Divide and Access Poverty

- 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.
- 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.

## Conclusion

The evidence and recommendations included in this report are department-specific and have been specifically developed for the Department for Communities. The full WPG Feminist Recovery Plan can be accessed [here](#), which includes more detail on the issues raised in this report and further recommendations for other NI departments, the NI Executive and the UK Government.

The WPG Feminist Recovery plan provides a roadmap to recovery that will address gender inequality in Northern Ireland. This plan has been created by experts working in women's rights, LGBT+ sector, human rights, trade unions, campaigning organisations, rural groups NGOs and more. This plan provides significant evidence under the multiple pillars, including:

1. Economic Justice Pillar
2. Health Pillar
3. Social Justice Pillar
4. Cultural Pillar
5. Brexit and a NI Bill of Rights - Rights at Risk
6. International Outlooks - Best Practice Case Studies

Experts have provided evidence under each pillar of this plan and our recommendations are clear - the recovery from COVID-19 cannot come on the backs of women. If the recommendations throughout this plan are taken on board, significant progress will have been made to tackle deep gender inequality in Northern Ireland.