

NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: *Election Asks*

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Summary of Asks

1. Address the unequal distribution, and undervaluing, of caring responsibilities and Implement the Childcare Strategy/Government Funded Childcare Provision.
2. Implement Gender Pay Gap Legislation and create a Women's Employment Strategy.
3. Address gendered nature of poverty and austerity policies (particularly in current context of cost of living crisis and opposition to gender neutral policy making).
4. Ring-fenced and sustainable funding for women's organisations and women's centres.
5. Implement NDNA commitments to increase access to IVF cycles, commission abortion services and implement robust perinatal mental health care services (including mother and baby units).
6. Address Rural Access Poverty and Digital Divide.
7. Address NHS waiting lists.
8. Address underrepresentation of women in politics, public life and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland.
9. Support and fully resource a women-centred VAWG strategy, recognising misogyny as a statutory aggravator of hate crime.
10. Introduce standardised, compulsory and inclusive RSE in schools.
11. Introduce a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.
12. Introduce Social Inclusion Strategies.
13. Implement WRDA' Guidelines for Public Authorities on Putting Women at the Heart of Public Consultation.

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, 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 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.

WPG Feminist Recovery Plan

In July 2020, the Women's Policy Group published the original WPG Feminist Recovery Plan which highlighted the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and made several recommendations for addressing this impact. This Plan was updated and relaunched in July 2021, alongside a supplementary research report compiling findings from WPG Primary Research, one year after the initial Plan was published. Both Plans provide detailed evidence of pre-existing gender inequalities in our society, which have become exacerbated as a result of the pandemic and cover a wide range of topics, including housing, violence against women, health inequalities and women's poverty.

The Feminist Recovery Plans make several recommendations for how policy-makers and legislators can address pre-existing gender inequalities and the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women. These recommendations fall under six main Pillars: Economic Justice, Health, Social Justice, Culture, Brexit, Human Rights and a Bill of Rights, and International Best Practice. Despite first publishing the Plan in 2020, as of May 2022, the majority of recommendations made in the Feminist Recovery Plans remain outstanding.

This briefing will summarise key outstanding recommendations under each Pillar of the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan and highlight areas where action is required by elected representatives of the incoming Assembly after the May 2022 election.

The WPG Feminist Recovery Plans can be accessed at the following links:

- Original WPG Feminist Recovery Plan [\(2020\)](#)
- Relaunched WPG Feminist Recovery Plan [\(2021\)](#)
- WPG Primary Research Report: Putting Women's Voices at the Core [\(2021\)](#)
- Relaunched WPG Feminist Recovery Plan: Summary of Recommendations [\(2021\)](#)
- Relaunched WPG Feminist Recovery Plan: Executive Summary [\(2021\)](#)



Election Asks

1. Economic Justice Pillar

1.1 Women's Employment and Gender Pay Gap Reporting

- Implement Gender Pay Gap Legislation and create a Women's Employment Strategy.
- Include financial penalties for employers who flout the law by failing to report gender pay gap data.
- All workers to get the right to request flexible working at any stage in their employment.
- Parental leave should be available for all workers, should be a day one right and should be paid at 90% of AWE and the remainder at least the Real Living Wage (RLW).

1.2 Gender Segregated Markets and Care Work

- Address unequal distribution, and undervaluing, of caring responsibilities.
- 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.
- Monitor gender parity in the professions of the future. This would provide a critical opportunity to guide the emerging labour market to more equitable outcomes in the future of work.
- Introduce reskilling and upskilling efforts for women interested in expanding their skills range. This should be focused on those already in the labour market or looking to re-enter the labour market after a period of inactivity.
- Require all workplaces to record and publish gender segregation and gender pay gap data.
- 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.

1.3 Women's Poverty and Austerity

- Address the gendered nature of poverty and austerity policies (particularly in current context of cost of living crisis and opposition to gender neutral policy making).
- Fully implement the Housing Supply Strategy and continue engagement with women's sector on this work.
- Ring-fenced and sustainable funding for women's organisations and women's centres.
- Progress recommendations from Discretionary Support Review.
- Take forward recommendations from Welfare Mitigations Review
 - Consideration should be given to providing an additional mitigation payment to families who are impacted by the two-child limit.
 - 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.
- Address disproportionate impact of welfare reform/austerity measures on women particularly single parents.
- Introduce a NI Child Payment to address increases in child poverty which is inextricably linked to women's poverty.
- Provide support for people struggling with problem debt - provide a safe route out of problem debt including allowing for repayments to be made at an affordable level without increasing debts or incurring poor credit ratings.
- Provide alternatives to high-cost credit for those on the lowest incomes through low or no interest loans.
- Address issues with the private rented sector - support package to help private renters clear rent arrears and prevent people losing their homes. This could include grants, no-interest loans and protection from eviction.
- Address the cost of living crisis particularly for energy costs. We welcome the introduction of the Energy Payment Support Scheme in Northern Ireland to provide one-off payments of £200 to people needing support with energy costs on certain benefits. However, we would like to see a longer-term approach to this issue as energy price rises are likely to remain for a considerable time. We would also like to see targeted help for the lowest paid workers who are outside any help available through the social security system but who are also struggling to make ends meet with these increased costs.

1.4 Childcare

- Fully implement the Childcare Strategy and introduce adequate provision of government funded childcare.
- Ensure all parents and childcare providers are accessing the financial help they are entitled to.

1.5 Rural Women

- Address Rural Access Poverty and Digital Divide
- Ensure rural women have dedicated rural development resourcing that takes account of gender differentials and Covid-19 impacts.
- Recognition that all Government Departments have a responsibility to deliver for rural women, not only DAERA.
- Resourcing and support for rural community capacity building to aid Covid-19 recovery and sustainability.

1.6 A Feminist Green Economy

- Encourage women and girls into male-dominated green sectors that are encouraged through a Northern Ireland Green New Deal.
- 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,
- 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,

1.7 Paramilitarism, Gate Keeping and Control of Funding

- An urgent, sector-wide review on the eligibility criteria regarding eligibility for public funding.
- Practical guidance and assistance for those in poverty, integrated with and informed by the Anti-Poverty Strategy, that will divert vulnerable people from accessing loans from loan sharks by providing practical short-term and long-term routes out of poverty.
- A scoping exercise into the practicalities of adopting a policy position that advocates for the decriminalisation and regulation of drugs, so that this powerful method of community control and financial reward is taken out of the hands of paramilitaries.
- Advocate for the application of UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland.

2. Health Pillar

2.1 Mental Health

- Implement robust perinatal mental health care services (including mother and baby units).
- Address mental health NHS waiting lists.
- Improve access to culturally competent sexual health services (reducing STI/HIV anxiety).
- 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.
- Identify carers as a priority group requiring emotional support services and develop agreed pathways for them to access mental health interventions.
- 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.

2.2 Budgets and Privatisation

- Introduce multi-year budgets to allow for measures to be implemented to address the waiting list crisis in Northern Ireland.
- Develop a 10-year strategy to address waiting lists in Northern Ireland and ensure private healthcare does not become the norm nor create further barriers for those unable to afford private healthcare.
- The NI Assembly should actively lobby against any steps that towards the privatisation of the NHS by the UK Government.

2.3 Abortion, Maternal Health and Bodily Autonomy

- Implement NDNA commitments to increase access to IVF cycles
- Commission abortion services
- Introduce abortion telemedicine in line with the rest of the UK and Ireland.

- Roll out relationships and sexuality education (RSE) according to the CEDAW minimum recommendations as set out in our primary legislation.
- Long-term sustainability and funding provided for community and voluntary sector maternal mental health projects such as the Mas project.
- Increase and improve care for women with neurological complications, pre-existing health conditions, disability, medical or surgical disorders and infection.

2.4 Health Inequalities and Hostile Environment for Migrants and Black and Minority Ethnic People

- NHS Charging and data-sharing with the Home Office should be suspended indefinitely and this must be accompanied by a public information campaign reassuring people that it will be safe for them to access healthcare, regardless of their immigration status.
- The Department of Health must issue clear public guidance on eligibility for vaccinations for members of the migrant community, including people living in Northern Ireland without settled status.

2.5 Trans Healthcare

- Specialised gender identity services, following a human rights compliant and culturally competent service model, should be fully commissioned by the Department of Health and be available for trans and questioning people who wish to access them to explore their gender identity. This should not be a centralised service for all trans people and access to these services should not be a prerequisite to accessing gender-transition-related healthcare.
- Any new gender affirming services should be based in the community and on a sexual health model of care.

2.6 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.
- Urgently address and reform the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) application process, Universal Credit and Welfare Reform, to prevent any further.

3. Social Justice Pillar

3.1 Racial Justice

- Urgently implement the Racial Equality Strategy and incorporate accountability mechanisms into the Programme for Government to address systemic racism.
- Better and more transparent collection and reporting of ethnicity data is needed to understand the full impact of COVID-19; including reports from employers of redundancies with breakdowns of protected characteristics.
- Scrap No Recourse to Public Funds.
- Support families' access to educational resources and equipment at home to minimise the increased racial attainment gaps – including the provision of IT equipment and additional support for parents.
- Immediately close the Larne Detention Centre.
- Take immediate action to ensure all refugee and asylum seeker women have access to legal aid for immigration and asylum cases.

3.2 Politics, Public Life, Peacebuilding and Decision-Making

- Address the underrepresentation of women in politics, public life and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland.
- Recognition of intersectionalities which compound barriers to participation e.g., specific issues impacting BME women, disabled women, rural women, LGBTQ+ women, younger women, lone parents and those with childcare responsibilities.
- Embed gender mainstreaming, gender proofing and gender budgeting into all decision-making process in the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- Implement WRDA' Guidelines for Public Authorities on Putting Women at the Heart of Public Consultation.

3.3 Restorative Justice

- Rethink what justice means and move away from a punitive and carceral criminal justice system. This is imperative to reducing harm in our communities and building a Northern Ireland on foundations of care over violence.
- The Department of Justice should commence work into the demilitarisation of the Police Service and move to prioritising care in our communities.

- To effectively tackle violence against women, coordinated action from government is required, including preventative measures, early intervention and protection, and victim-centred justice to address the lack of services and barriers faced by women and girls.

4. Cultural Pillar

4.1 Women and Girls in the Media, Rape Culture and Violence Against Women and Girls.

- Introduce Social Inclusion Strategies.
- Fully implement the Gillen Review recommendations.
- Introduce a comprehensive, standardised, compulsory and inclusive programme on relationships and sexuality education (RSE), for all schools and 3rd level institutions.
- Support and fully resource a women-centred VAWG strategy.
- Ensure all awareness raising programmes in schools are in line with CEDAW General Recommendation 35, with a focus on informing and educating individuals on consent, sexual harassment and victim blaming to dismantle the belief that women and girls are responsible for their own safety.
- Ensure that effective measures are taken within the justice system to address high attrition and low conviction rates.
- Grant of Secure tenancies in cases of domestic violence and abuse with recognition of the differing needs of disabled women, Traveller women, trans communities, rural women, migrant women etc.
- Recognition of disproportionate impact on rural women, areas of paramilitary control, migrant women, LGBT+ groups, disabled women etc.
- Increase awareness of various forms of honour-based abuse across the justice system in Northern Ireland, including Spiritual Abuse and Coercive Control through work with community groups supporting survivors.

4.2 Hate Crimes and Online Abuse

- Recognise misogyny as a statutory aggravator of hate crime

- Recognise the severe harm caused by online hate speech against women by ensuring online harm is fully covered within hate crime legislation.
- Commission extensive research specific to Northern Ireland to tackle the under-reporting of hate crime and mistrust from minorities in reporting services.
- Adequately fund and expand the Hate Crime Advocacy Scheme.

4.3 Education and Training

- 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).
- Universal free school meals should be provided to all children as a measure to combat poverty, improve educational outcomes, and improve public health.
- An increased focus on equality and diversity should be introduced into the curriculum when it is next updated.
- 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.
- Provide investment for community-based training and education and integrated childcare to enable women in low-income households to access the training and education.
- 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.

5. Brexit, Human Rights and a Bill of Rights for NI Pillar

5.1 Impact of Brexit

- Any re-examination/revision of the Northern Ireland Protocol, or negotiations of the future relationship must ensure that women are adequately represented at the negotiating table and that women's voices are articulated throughout.

- Any funds replacing the European Social Fund, and other sources of EU funding, must include provision for wrap around services to ensure that women and carers can take part.

5.2 Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland

- Introduce a strong and inclusive Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, which includes a comprehensive, freestanding right to equality and non- discrimination and which draws upon international human rights and equality obligations.
- Incorporate all rights contained within the EU Charter into domestic legislation.
- Make it clear to the UK Government that any attempts to undermine the Human Rights Act 1998 will be directly opposed to the will of the people of Northern Ireland and would breach the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

5.3 New Decade New Approach Agreement

- Urgent implementation of all commitments outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

6. International Best Practice Pillar

- Put women and girls at the centre of the COVID-19 response, to mitigate disproportionate harms on women and support new policies on gender equality in the post pandemic period.
- Ensure women and gender equality are integral to policy and decision making.
- Recognise domestic violence organisations as essential services. This will help to strengthen service provision beyond the pandemic.
- Take an innovative approach to investment, with a focus on sectors that add value to wellbeing and create sustainable jobs, such as public transport, green infrastructure, education and community development.
- 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.

- 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. A caring economy, education for girls and reproductive rights are at the centre of both gender and climate justice.



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