

Health Inequalities in Northern Ireland

Chapter Two:

The Impact of the Cost of Living Crisis on Women's Health

Key Research Findings

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Introduction

The ongoing Cost of Living Crisis is affecting everyone in Northern Ireland. However, because women are more likely to be single parents, experience poverty, and have care responsibilities, they are being disproportionately impacted. The findings from this research paint a stark picture of how the Cost of Living Crisis is impacting both women's physical and mental health, and highlights the need for urgent intervention from civil servants, political representatives and policy-makers.

This report is the second chapter of a research project conducted by the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) into health inequalities faced by women in Northern Ireland. This research was informed by primary and secondary research in the form of in-person focus groups, an anonymous online survey, desk research and analysis of research, policy and legislative documents.

This report was published in February 2024 and primary research was conducted between October and November 2023. In total, 7 focus groups were conducted with 63 women and 126 survey responses were received to the anonymous online survey which was open for 7 weeks between 9th October and 29th November 2023.

Key Findings

Key Quantitative Findings

- 83% of survey respondents said their health had been impacted by the Cost of Living Crisis
- 89% of survey respondents said their mental health had worsened as a result of the Cost of Living Crisis
- As a result of the Cost of Living Crisis:
 - 82% of respondents reported increased stress levels
 - 70% of respondents reported feeling anxious
 - 60% of respondents reported feeling depressed
- 80% of survey respondents who have care responsibilities said these responsibilities had been impacted by the Cost of Living Crisis
- 98% of survey respondents said the Cost of Living Crisis had impacted their grocery shopping. Of these respondents:
 - 83% reported buying cheaper food options
 - 79% reported buying less items
 - 59% reported buying less fresh fruit and vegetables
 - 59% of women reported buying less fresh fruit and vegetables

Key Qualitative Findings

- The most commonly cited impacts of the Cost of Living Crisis on mental health included:
 - Increased stress and anxiety
 - Increased isolation and loneliness
 - Low mood and depression
 - Feelings of guilt and of being a 'failure'
- The most commonly cited impacts of the Cost of Living Crisis on physical health included:
 - The development of new health conditions
 - The exacerbation of pre-existing health conditions
 - The increasing cost of treatment and medicines
 - Being unable to meet special dietary requirements
- Commonly reported changes to diet as a result of the Cost of Living Crisis included:
 - Cutting back on the number of meals consumed per day
 - Eating food that is past its best-before date
 - Eating more frozen and tinned food
 - Eating less meat and fish
 - Eating less fresh fruit and vegetables
- The most commonly cited ways that the Cost of Living Crisis has impacted care responsibilities included:
 - Negative impacts on mental health
 - Struggling to afford food for those being care for
 - No longer able to take children out for activities
 - Increasing costs of childcare
 - Increased petrol costs associated with care
 - Increased levels of social isolation
- The most commonly cited issues with accessing healthcare support included:
 - Being unable to make a GP appointment
 - Lack of follow up communication from GP surgeries
 - Long NHS waiting lists for mental health support
 - Long NHS waiting lists for appointments, scans and procedures
- Disabled women were more likely than non-disabled women to report that their physical health had been impacted by the Cost of Living Crisis.

- Women's centres are providing frontline support to women who are at risk of poverty by providing food, signposting and mental health support.
- The Cost of Living Crisis is forcing many women out of work who cannot afford to pay for childcare, and forcing many women who are providing care to seek additional sources of work on top of their caring responsibilities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings presented in this report, WRDA has made the following recommendations aimed at better supporting women's health through the Cost of Living Crisis:

1. The Department of Health should urgently implement a Women's Health Strategy for Northern Ireland
2. The Department of Education should urgently implement the long-overdue Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland
3. All of the Social Inclusion Strategies, including the Gender Equality Strategy and the Anti-Poverty Strategy, should be urgently implemented
4. Increase levels of investment in women's centres to ensure they are sustainably funded to provide support to women in their local communities
5. Urgently review levels of benefits in line with the increasing cost of living and increase the level of entitlements for asylum seeker women

Further Information

If you have any questions or queries regarding this research report, please contact the Researcher for this project, Aoife Mallon, at aoife.mallon@wrda.net or Elaine Crory at elaine.croy@wrda.net. Any general queries regarding the work of WRDA should be directed to info@wrda.net.