



Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas

Response to: Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-21

Issued by: Northern Ireland Executive

July 2016

**Prepared by:
Dr Caroline Walsh
Women's Support Network
policy@wsn.org.uk**



Foyle Women's Information Network



Women's Regional Consortium: Working to Support Women in Rural Communities and Disadvantaged Urban Areas

1. Introduction

1.1 This response has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (hereafter, the Women's Consortium or, simply, the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland.

1.2 The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups working in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.¹ The seven groups are as follows:

- Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project Lead
- Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- Women's Support Network (WSN)
- Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- Women's TEC
- Women's Centre Derry (WCD)
- Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

1.3 The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium ensures that there is a continuous two way flow of information between government and the sector. It further ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of

¹ Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisations.

consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which can ultimately result in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

1.4 This response is informed by women's views and perspectives articulated in focus group engagement facilitated by FWIN and Women's Centre Derry, and interview and questionnaire engagement organised by NIRWN, during June and July 2016. Appendix 1 provides further detail on this engagement, while Appendix 2 summarises reported policy priorities for action plan inclusion in respect of the finalised programme.

2. General comments

The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Northern Ireland Executive's 'Draft programme for government framework 2016-21'.²

In a context of extended austerity, compounded by Brexit-generated socio-economic, political and legal uncertainty, including uncertainty over the future of extant rights protections,³ the Consortium remains profoundly concerned about the question of social justice and gender equality for vulnerable female cohorts in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland, both in the current mandate and beyond.

As is well-documented,⁴ the agency, well being, life chances and life outcomes of such cohorts can be profoundly constrained by different kinds of

² Northern Ireland Executive, 'Draft programme for government framework: 2016-21', NIE, Belfast: 2016.

³ On this, see, for example, A. Dannreuther and A. Wagner, 'What Brexit would mean for human rights', Rightsorg [Online]. Available at: <http://rightsinfo.org/brexit-mean-human-rights/>

⁴ See, for example, B. Hinds, 'The Northern Ireland economy: women on the edge? A comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the financial crisis', WRDA: Belfast, 2011; also, H. McLaughlin, 'Women living in disadvantaged communities: barriers to participation', Women's Centres' Regional Partnership, Belfast: 2009.

marginalisation, exclusion and poverty. Unfair cultural-structural gender inequality that cuts across the private and public spheres continues to fundamentally contribute to this gender vulnerability; and, ongoing austerity has complicated this picture of cultural-structural injustice precisely by adversely impacting women and the most vulnerable disproportionately.⁵

In large part, the enduring nature of the gendered vulnerability at hand in deprived and rural areas speaks of a distinct failure of successive governments in the jurisdiction to deliver substantive change to gender inequality.⁶ That said, arguably, the programme mechanism under review potentially represents a significant opportunity for government to begin to attend to this failure in substantive ways, and so take better account of this gendered vulnerability than have previous administrations.

From this perspective, we welcome this consultation exercise as affirmation of government intent to concentrate its interventionist efforts for the current mandate, in part at least, on a variegated equality agenda, i.e. on 'improving wellbeing for all [citizens] by tackling disadvantage', in pursuit of '*a more equal society*'.⁷ However, for reasons that follow, this is very much a cautious welcome.

It is troubling in the extreme that a programme delivery document – *specifically framed in terms of advancing equality for all citizens* – should make no allusion whatsoever to addressing gender inequality, and thus should conspicuously neglect to articulate the kind of gender justice perspective fundamentally required to help address the gendered vulnerability at hand.

⁵ J. Portes and H. Reed, 'Austerity has hit women, ethnic minorities and the disabled most', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2014. See also, for example, Fawcett Society, 'The impact of austerity on women, policy briefing', Fawcett Society: London, 2012; and, Scottish Government, 'The gender impact of welfare reform', Scottish Government: Edinburgh: 2013

⁶ On this, see the recent review of the prevailing gender equality strategy in the Northern Ireland case. It was 'judged' that, across all departments, only 37 out of the 126 outcomes or 'action points' in the applicable 2008-11 action plans had been achieved, equating to 29 per cent. OFMDFM, 'Gender equality strategy 2006-2016 review', OFMDFM/NISRA, Belfast, 2013.

⁷ Northern Ireland Executive, *op. cit.*

Furthermore, this omission emerges as profoundly puzzling when it is considered that the overall purpose of the proposed framework is also expressed in terms of 'improving wellbeing for all [citizens] *by... driving economic growth*'.⁸ The reason for the puzzlement is this: as research suggests, the relationship between gender equality and economic growth is such that the former '*can contribute significantly*' to the latter 'by expanding the stock of human capital, raising labour productivity, improving agricultural productivity and increasing the stock of physical capital'.⁹ In short, then, despite a central ambition to promote economic growth, the proposed framework neglects to explicitly provide for the contribution of gender equality to such growth.

On this view, for reasons of social justice, if government is genuinely serious about 'improving wellbeing for all [citizens] by [both] tackling disadvantage and driving economic growth',¹⁰ then it should explicitly include within its programme for government an express ambition to help address wider gender inequality, integrating and mapping this ambition across its entire outcome/indicator/measure model and subsequent detailed action plans.

The remainder of this paper will elaborate on this social justice imperative, setting out a plethora of associated concerns in respect of the following factors:

- (i)** the innately restricted nature of the proposed indicators/measures;
- (ii)** the need to attend to shortfalls in pertinent gender disaggregated equality data within the jurisdiction, which threaten to undermine effective evaluation, monitoring and review of progress made under the framework;
- (iii)** the policy accountability and efficacy case for underpinning the framework with equality responsive budgeting – including gender budgeting - across all associated policy and delivery processes;¹¹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ J. Ward et al., 'Evidence for action gender equality and economic growth', Chatham House: London, 2010, p.xiii.

¹⁰ Northern Ireland Executive, op. cit.

¹¹ On this, see: S. Quinn, 'Equality responsive budgeting', ECNI: Belfast, 2013.

- (iv) the absence of clarity in the document with regards to the intended definition of ‘most vulnerable’ to be used in resource distribution decision-making made under the framework;
- (v) the apparently unanswered question of social protection under the framework for ‘welfare dependent’ vulnerable cohorts disproportionately affected by ongoing welfare reductions, following expiry of approved short-term mitigation;
- (vi) the longstanding childcare dilemma in deprived and rural areas associable with women’s lack of economic participation and financial independence; and,
- (vii) the need to ensure the developed model remains inherently rights compliant.

Participants in the focus group, interview and questionnaire engagement articulated these concerns and raised associated misgivings, as will be shown in the remainder of the paper.

3. Specific comments

3.1 Gender equality perspective and data shortfalls: an illustration

The Consortium is concerned that, in the absence of an explicit and robust gender equality dimension, the proposed indicators and measures may ultimately prove too restrictive to take proper account of the complex, interacting and often gendered factors underlying the vulnerability and poverty of women in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction. To illustrate this important point, this section briefly considers the case for integrating a gender equality perspective, appropriately supported by enhanced gender disaggregated data, into the proposed indicator/measure combination pertaining to underemployment.

Integrating gender equality – an illustration: underemployment

3.1.1 The proposed framework contains a government ambition to ‘reduce underemployment’ in the jurisdiction, the realisation of which, it is intended, will be measurable through gauging change to the number of ‘people working

part-time who would like to work more hours'.¹² Underemployment in the Northern Ireland case remains a distinctly gendered phenomenon: women in the jurisdiction comprise the overwhelming majority of all part-time employees (almost four fifths); in addition, thirty eight per cent of all female employees work part-time compared to just ten per cent of all male employees.¹³ And, as is well established - *in no small part* - these key gendered differentials in underemployment are contributed to by the gendered division of labour, which can impede women's economic participation in the public sphere, precisely by placing on them a disproportionate unpaid work burden of primary care giver/domestic labourer.¹⁴

Yet, worryingly, as things stand, the executive's own labour market data collection arrangements do not seem to allow it to accurately establish the precise nature of this care and domestic labour burden on women's underemployment.¹⁵ This is because, although under current arrangements respondents are asked to give reasons to explain their economic inactivity – including, crucially, whether 'family/home commitments' represents one such reason – conversely, *it would appear they are not specifically asked to do so in respect of underemployment*.¹⁶ As a result, while it is clear from collected government data that a portion of part-time female employees might indeed 'want a full-time job',¹⁷ we do not know – for there would appear to be no data collected on - the extent to which women's part-time status in the jurisdiction might be due to 'family/home commitments', including care commitments.¹⁸ Certainly, no data on same is evident in government's central statistical publication on women in the labour market.¹⁹

Clearly, without such gender disaggregated data, government understanding and explanation of women's underemployment in the jurisdiction remains

¹² Northern Ireland Executive, *op. cit.*

¹³ NISRA, 'Women in Northern Ireland 2015', NISRA: Belfast, 2015, p.14.

¹⁴ See, for example, McLaughlin, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ NISRA, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

essentially partial. This is troubling, for obvious reasons: in an evidence-based policymaking context, for the sake of more meaningful and effective policy development, service planning and resource distribution, it is paramount that government should seek to maximise its contextualised understanding and explanation of whatever social problem it should seek to remedially address.

It is precisely from this perspective that the executive should attend to the apparent gender disaggregated data shortfall at hand, while also seeking to deal with any associated shortfalls that might threaten to undermine the efficacy of the finalised indicator/measure model. This should be undertaken as part of a wider commitment to attend to the social justice case for embedding and integrating a robust gender equality perspective across the entire framework and accompanying action plans. The inherent logic of such an undertaking has already been set out in this paper: the stated purpose of the proposed framework is described in terms of ‘improving wellbeing for all [citizens] *by tacking disadvantage, and driving economic growth*’ in pursuit of, inter alia, a ‘more equal society’;²⁰ and, as is well-documented, gender equality ‘*can contribute significantly*’ to the former.²¹ On this view, it is both reasonable and rational to assume that the framework vision of economic growth per se *should have committed government to articulating a distinct gender equality perspective within the programme*. Such a commitment would, of course, be strengthened were government also to attend to the policy accountability case for underpinning the framework with equality responsive budgeting structures, including gender budgeting variants, across all associated policy and delivery processes.²²

Recommendation

The Consortium recommends that the executive take seriously the social justice case for integrating a robust gender equality perspective across its wider indicator/measure/action plan model, ensuring therein that it addresses

²⁰ Northern Ireland Executive, op. cit.

²¹ Ward et al., op. cit.

²² On this, see Quinn, op. cit.

any shortfalls in gender disaggregated data that might threaten to undermine the efficacy and meaningfulness of the proposed framework.

3.2 Austerity and social protection of the ‘most vulnerable’

We note with particular interest the inclusion within the draft framework of an outcome entailing care ‘for the most vulnerable in ... society’.²³ In a context of extended austerity, compounded by Brexit-associated socio-economic and other uncertainty, the Consortium remains acutely concerned about the issue of social protection for the most vulnerable in the jurisdiction, both in the current mandate and beyond.

As previously implied, research affirms the disproportionate adverse impact that ongoing United Kingdom austerity has had on the everyday lives of vulnerable cohorts.²⁴ Broadly, that impact has been characterised in terms of ‘harsh consequences for vulnerable people... affect[ing] all disadvantaged communities’²⁵ associated, variously, with a reported ‘widespread increase in poverty’²⁶ as well as anxiety, debt, health problems and homelessness.²⁷

There is also, of course, as already noted, a distinct gendered dimension to this impact: as is well established in the literature, the model of austerity at hand has also disproportionately affected women adversely. More precisely, ongoing austerity has made ‘many women poorer and less financially autonomous’,²⁸ exacerbating both in-work poverty and variants affecting workless households, while therein having a ‘devastating impact on women’s equality, safety and well being’.²⁹

²³ Northern Ireland Executive, *op. cit.*

²⁴ *Supra* note 5 pertains.

²⁵ A. Power et al., ‘The impact of welfare reform on social landlords and tenants’, JRF, London: 2014, p.1. See also, M. Aylott et al., ‘An insight into the impact of the cuts on some of the most vulnerable in Camden’, Young Foundation: London, 2012.

²⁶ Power et al., *op. cit.*, p.5.

²⁷ L. James and J. Patiniotis, ‘Women at the cutting edge: why public sector spending cuts in Liverpool are a gender equality issue’, Liverpool John Moores University: Liverpool, 2013.

²⁸ Fawcett Society, *op. cit.*, p.3.

²⁹ James and Patiniotis, *op. cit.*, p.12.

To compound matters yet still further for such vulnerable cohorts, it is projected that the model of extended austerity under review will ‘contribute to the suffering of the jobless and the poor *for many years*’,³⁰ and that its likely longer-term impact on women’s positioning in the public-private sphere nexus ‘will be to turn back time on a range of indicators of women’s rights and equality’.³¹

Research documents this austerity-associated rise in vulnerability among affected cohorts in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland.³² And, we recognise that government has extended some level of short-term mitigation to some of these cohorts in respect of same, including, for example, ‘fresh start’ welfare reform mitigation. However, research on the jurisdiction has shown that when such mitigation ceases, affected cohorts can tend to experience increased vulnerability.³³ For example, research in respect of mitigation to take account of recent changes in state assistance for private sector renters has evidenced significant levels of post-mitigation vulnerability, comprising increases in rent arrears, evictions and homelessness.³⁴

These research findings render compelling the question at hand of social protection under the framework for ‘welfare dependent’ vulnerable cohorts disproportionately affected by ongoing austerity-rationalised state income reductions, *especially in the period following cessation of any approved mitigation.*

Recommendation

The Consortium recommends that the executive take seriously the compelling social justice question of social protection under the framework for welfare dependent vulnerable cohorts disproportionately affected by ongoing austerity-associated state income reductions, giving due regard therein to any

³⁰ J. Stiglitz, quoted in Oxfam, ‘Oxfam briefing paper summary: a cautionary tale - the true cost of austerity and inequality in Europe’, Oxfam: London, 2013, p.2.

³¹ Fawcett Society, op. cit. p.3.

³² See, for example, Hinds, op. cit.

³³ S. Fitzpatrick et al., ‘The homelessness monitor: Northern Ireland 2013’, Crisis: London: 2013.

³⁴ Ibid.

increases in vulnerability following cessation of any approved mitigation schemes.

3.3 Distributive decision-making: definition of ‘most vulnerable’

The Consortium is concerned about the absence of clarity in the document with regards to the intended definition of ‘most vulnerable’ to be used by government in resource distribution decision-making made under the finalised framework.

As previously noted, research suggests that extended austerity ‘is contributing to inequality that will make economic weakness *longer-lived*’.³⁵ Longer-lived economic weakness of this kind may, of course, be associated with the prolongation of severe fiscal constraints. And, the latter may, in turn, be associated with the extension of retrenchments in social expenditure.

Clearly, in combination, these associations may conceivably further intensify competition for already scarce public resources across different kinds of vulnerable constituencies of need, reflecting comparably compelling social justice priorities. This projection **(i)** raises various social justice concerns about the future protection of the most vulnerable and economically marginalised in overall policy development and service delivery planning in the jurisdiction; while therein **(ii)** underlining the need for clarity on the question at hand, as to the precise definition of ‘most vulnerable’ that will inform distributive decision-making under the framework.

Recommendation

In a context of increased - and further projected increases in - competition for already constrained public resources across different kinds of vulnerable constituencies of need, the Consortium recommends that the executive provide clarity as to the precise definition of ‘most vulnerable’ it intends relying upon in resource distribution decision-making under the framework in respect of affected cohorts.

³⁵ Stiglitz, quoted in Oxfam, op. cit., p.2.

3.4 Outcome-based accountability: fundamentally flawed

The Consortium is troubled that the proposed methodology for prioritising and evaluating interventionism under the finalised framework should rely so fundamentally on an approach to programme making that research cites as inherently flawed, i.e. outcome based accountability.

Defenders of the latter posit that change to social problems may be convincingly attributed to specific organisational interventions. Critics, however, contest this central claim, observing that the complexity of factors underlying social problems is such that substantive change to those problems cannot be plausibly and readily ascribed to specific interventions. This crucial point has been summarised thus:

to hold programmes or organisations accountable for producing results, you must be able to identify who has been responsible for producing which outcomes. *The trouble is, that's impossible.* Outcomes are not produced by organisations (or programmes, teams etc). Real-life outcomes are produced by a huge range of factors and interventions working together (in technical terms – outcomes are emergent properties of complex systems).³⁶

Commentators also critique the reliance of outcome-based accountability models on so-called 'proxy indicators', i.e. 'things that are easy and quick to measure'.³⁷ Such indicators are to be found in the draft programme. The idea here is that the remedial impact on everyday lives of a given government intervention cannot be meaningfully or accurately gauged by such indicators; and, alternative, i.e. suitably robust and complex quantitative/qualitative variants, are subsequently called for.³⁸ Put differently, the idea is that complex social problems call for complex nuanced solutions, progress towards which can only be meaningfully evaluated through reliance on a suitably expansive and multilayered remedial indicator/measure model, *such as is not to be found in the draft programme.*

³⁶ T. Lowe, 'Soapbox: the sorry tale of 'outcome-based performance management'', Slugg O'Toole [Online]. Available at: <https://sluggerotoole.com/2016/07/05/soapbox-the-sorry-tale-of-outcome-based-performance-management/>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

In short, on this view, outcome-based accountability does not tend to take due account of the complexity of the factors underlying social problems and as such cannot be plausibly relied upon to frame and evaluate targeted government interventions in respect of same.³⁹

Recommendation

As it takes forward the framework, government should take proper account of the well-documented problems with programme reliance on outcome-based accountability, ultimately ensuring that those problems are not allowed to undermine the efficacy of programme delivery and review.

3.5 Rural proofing

Participants in the focus group, interview and questionnaire engagement informing this response set out a robust social justice case for substantive rural proofing of all investment and delivery mechanisms that should fall under the finalised framework and associated action plans. That case was spelt out in terms of a normative imperative to attend to the cumulative adverse impact on everyday lives of the enduring legacy of infrastructural underinvestment in rural, and subsequent rural/urban socio-economic indicator differentials,⁴⁰ which research associates with, inter alia, aggravated isolation, disconnectedness and diminished life chances and outcomes.⁴¹

Three 'access' factors in particular were singled out as being among the most fundamental infrastructural concerns for rural constituencies in the wider framework debate: **(i)** the relationship between the nature of the extant road and transport network in the jurisdiction and restricted rural access to employment and public services, particularly health and educational variants; **(ii)** the relationship between rural remoteness, problematic broadband

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ For example, as the Executive's own research puts it in respect of public sector funding differentials to the wider women's sector: 'compared with levels of government funding to women's groups in urban areas, there was a relatively low level of government funding to rural women's groups'. DSD/OFMDFM, 'Review of government funding for women's groups and organisations', DSD/OFMDFM: Belfast, 2012, p.13.

⁴¹ See, for example, M. Allen, 'Rural isolation, poverty and rural community/farmer wellbeing - scoping paper', Research and Information Service Briefing Paper, NIA: Belfast, 2014.

availability and well being at the level of the individual and beyond, including mental and economic well being; and, **(iii)** the adverse impact of rural remoteness on the accrual of social and human capital, investment, economic prosperity and, consequentially, on life chances and outcomes.

Although the document does include some ambitions that broadly address this multi-dimensional rural dilemma, for reasons previously outlined, the accompanying indicator/measure model appears too restrictive to take due account of the complexity of the interacting factors underlying the dilemma.⁴² Against this background, government should ensure appropriate rural baselines are in place to assist with effective monitoring, evaluation and review of the proposed framework, to include the addressing of any shortfalls in associated equality data that might threaten to undermine the realisation of an effective and meaningful indicator/measure model in respect of rural.

Recommendation

Government should ensure the robust rural proofing of all investment and delivery mechanisms that fall under the finalised framework and associated action plans, taking proper account of the enduring legacy of infrastructural underinvestment in rural areas and its adverse impact on the life chances and outcomes of vulnerable cohorts.

3.6 Women's lack of economic participation: the childcare dilemma

This section considers how even the partial realisation of key socio-economic ambitions set out in the document would innately rely on effective and meaningful interventions to address the chronic lack of appropriate (accessible and affordable) childcare in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction.

The document contains a plethora of socio-economic ambitions broadly framed in terms of increasing economic participation in the public sphere: inter alia, ambitions in respect of increased economic activity, decreased poverty

⁴² Lowe, op. cit.

and material progress. The crucial point here is this: as research affirms, in the aforementioned areas, lack of appropriate childcare (accessible and affordable) remains a fundamental impediment to the economic participation of women in the public sphere,⁴³ as well as their engagement in education/training intended as potential pathways to employment.⁴⁴

Put differently, the interacting factors underlying such women's experience of marginalisation and vulnerability includes the relationship between inadequate childcare, gender, poverty and the social division of labour.⁴⁵ As previously implied, the well-rehearsed argument is this: by ascribing to women the social role of unpaid primary carer and domestic labourer in the private sphere, the latter can innately constrain female economic participation in the public sphere, extending dependency on state support and/or partner income and thus increasing the risk of gender poverty.⁴⁶ Accordingly, the relationship at hand may significantly interfere with economic growth.⁴⁷ The important point here is subsequently this: *given that the purpose of the framework document under review is expressly posited in terms of economic growth, it might reasonably be expected that this is a relationship government should take very seriously within that document.*

Lamentably, as already implied, research suggests that government childcare interventions to date in deprived and rural areas have ultimately proven insubstantial in addressing the childcare dilemma under review.⁴⁸ Worse still, stakeholders project that further intended intervention outlined in the draft childcare strategy may extend this trajectory of insubstantiality.⁴⁹ For example, profound concern has been expressed over the anticipated cessation of the

⁴³ See, for example, C. Lidell, 'The caring jigsaw: systems of childcare and education in Northern Ireland', Save the Children: Belfast, 2009; also, McLaughlin, op. cit.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ See, F. Bennett and M. Daly, 'Poverty through a gender lens: evidence and policy review on gender and poverty', Joseph Rowntree Foundation/University of Oxford: London/Oxford, 2014.

⁴⁶ JRF, 'Reducing poverty in the UK: a collection of evidence reviews', JRF: London, 2014

⁴⁷ See Ward et al., op. cit.

⁴⁸ JRF, op. cit.

⁴⁹ C. Walsh, 'Response to: delivering social change through childcare: a ten year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare 2015-2025', Women's Regional Consortium: Belfast, 2015.

Women's Centres' Childcare Fund, set up by the now defunct Department for Social Development, which provides vital frontline childcare support for deprived, vulnerable women seeking to enter employment and education.⁵⁰ It is projected that the services the fund helps support could ultimately be discontinued in the absence of alternative, equivalent government intervention, and it remains to be seen whether such equivalence will be forthcoming.⁵¹

From this perspective, it is worrying in the extreme that there is no explicit acknowledgement in the document of the relationship between the gendered childcare dilemma underlying women's lack of economic participation and the imposition of profound constraints on the contribution of gender equality to economic growth. As a result, the proposed indicator/measure modelling on stimulating economic progress appears inherently under-developed and inadequate. Participants in the engagement processes informing this response universally underscored this substantive point, calling for a suitably revised and nuanced model replete with appositely robust and responsive action plans.

In sum, if government is serious about doing more to meaningfully engage women in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction as part of its broader socio-economic vision for this mandate and beyond, then it needs to attend to the childcare dilemma at hand in substantive and sustainable ways.

Recommendation

In finalising the wider outcome, indicator, measure and action plan model, government should take due account of the childcare dilemma at hand that threatens to impede effective realisation of many of its key socio-economic framework ambitions.

⁵⁰ Morrow Gilchrist Associates, 'Evaluation of regional support arrangements for the voluntary and community sector', Morrow Gilchrist Associates: Belfast, 2015.

⁵¹ Ibid.

3.7 Brexit and human rights compliance

The Consortium is concerned at the absence from the document of government assurance on rights compliance under proposed framework interventionism.

This omission is especially troubling in a Brexit-generated context that includes widespread speculation over the future of extant rights protections.⁵² Although in the advent of a Brexit ‘the UK will continue to be [both] bound by’ the European Convention on Human Rights and ‘subject to’ the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights,⁵³ at the same time, however, ‘the protection of these rights *‘may [still]...be subject to change* arising out of government plans to consult on repealing the Human Rights Act and replacing it with a bill of rights’.⁵⁴ As implied, such change – should it come - would ultimately be a matter for the United Kingdom government. However, in the meantime, from a social justice perspective, it remains important that the executive should unambiguously affirm its compliance commitment to extant right protections across all policy development and levels, *but particularly at programme level given what is at stake in this debate.*

Recommendation

Government should ensure that the framework under review remains inherently rights compliant and, to that end, should further ensure that it explicitly acknowledges this social justice imperative in the finalised document.

4. Conclusion

It has been suggested that the programme mechanism at hand could potentially represent a significant opportunity for the current government to attend to gendered vulnerability and poverty in deprived and rural areas of the

⁵² See, for example, M. Evans, ‘What Brexit means for our human rights’, The Justice Gap. [Online]. Available at: <http://thejusticegap.com/2016/06/brexit-means-human-rights/> See also, T. Lock, ‘What does Brexit have to do with human rights?’ OUP. [Online]. Available at: <http://blog.oup.com/2016/06/brexit-human-rights-law/>

⁵³ Lock, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Evans, op. cit.

jurisdiction in more effective and meaningful ways than have previous administrations. Yet, it has been argued that, in the absence of an explicit and robust gender equality dimension, the proposed indicators and measures may ultimately prove too restrictive to take proper account of the complex, interacting and often gendered factors underlying this vulnerability and poverty. The case was consequently made for integrating a distinct gender equality perspective across the entire programme, appropriately supported by enhanced gender disaggregated data and equality budgeting, such as might facilitate robust evaluation, monitoring and review. In light of what is at stake in this debate for vulnerable cohorts, we would strongly urge the government to take seriously the merit of this case.

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Appendix 1

Summary: qualitative research engagement detail

Focus groups: facilitation, locations and dates

- FWIN-facilitated focus groups at the Guildhall, Derry, on 28 June 2016, and at its own Derry premises on 6 July 2016
- Women's Centre Derry-facilitated focus group at its Derry premises on 27 June 2016

Interviews and questionnaires

- NIRWN-facilitated interviews and questionnaires with its rural membership base in the week beginning 20 June 2016, across the following council areas: Fermanagh and Omagh, Mid Ulster and Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon

Participants' profile summary

Overall composition: included some venue staff, board members and service users; and, more generally, women living and working in different disadvantaged and rural localities; including, parents, young people and older people

Appendix 2

Summary: action plan priorities identified by engagement participants

1. Educational inequality

More meaningful, effective and substantive actions called for in respect of:

- Women's educational disadvantage
- Unmet demand for community-based women's education and training: accredited/unaccredited *and* vocational/non-vocational variants
- Third-level outreach programmes in rural areas
- Childcare and financial support to facilitate vulnerable women's participation in education/training
- Gender inequalities in educational and vocational choices
- Progression pathways for educationally marginalised cohorts
- Underprovision of library services

2. Underemployment/unemployment and poverty

More meaningful, effective and substantive actions called for in respect of:

- Gender discrimination in the labour market
- Accessible and affordable childcare to stimulate women's economic participation and financial empowerment
- Financial and advice support for wider 'farming community', to include action on rural debt
- Gender poverty, including 'hidden poverty' within the household
- Job creation aimed at delivering 'work that pays', therein addressing women's benefit reliance and in-work poverty
- Growth in zero-hour contracts

3. Public services

More meaningful and effective actions called for in respect of:

- Rural transport dilemma
- Mental health shortfalls (see below)
- Deficits in affordable social housing
- Public awareness gaps of recent council reconfigurations
- Infrastructural and service support in rural and north-west, addressing any Belfast-centric bias
- Youth support at the level of the community

4. Child development

More meaningful, effective and substantive actions called for in respect of:

- Early years intervention and support
- Familial support at the level of the community
- Primary level investment to deliver requisite levels of child support
- Sure Start levels
- Community-based pre- and after-school provision and staffing levels

5. Mental health and well being

More meaningful, effective and substantive actions called for in respect of:

- Women's isolation and disconnectedness, particularly rural variants and that affecting the most vulnerable
- Acute deficits in children's and women's mental health service provision, including underprovision at the level of the community
- National health service waiting list and waiting time controversies
- Inaccessibility of services, particularly for rural and vulnerable cohorts
- Access to substance abuse treatment

6. Other societal issues

More meaningful, effective and substantive actions called for in respect of:

- Intimate partner violence and abuse, to include the relationship between the legacy of the conflict and gender based violence
- Unfair investment, infrastructural and employment disparities between rural, north-west and Belfast constituencies
- Section 75 compliance shortfalls
- Relationship between transport and road network inadequacies and sub-regional economic prosperity differentials
- Voluntary and community sector funding crisis
- Tenant problems in private rented sector