



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

## Policy Prioritisation for Disadvantaged Women: Women's Perspectives

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## **Acknowledgements**

The paper is the product of a collaborative project undertaken by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Communities and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.<sup>1</sup>

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 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. 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
- Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

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 ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in

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<sup>1</sup> The remaining paragraphs in this section represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisations.

disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately result in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

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## Executive summary

What are the policy issues that government should prioritise in taking account of the wellbeing, needs and interests of disadvantaged women in Northern Ireland? This brief paper explores the perspectives on this question of a cohort of women living and working in deprived and rural areas of the region.

Women in these areas can experience different kinds of disadvantage.<sup>2</sup> This disadvantage can be enduring in nature (as manifest, for example, in the experience of persistent and intergenerational poverty), and its extent can be significant.<sup>3</sup> Research suggests how women's disadvantage can emerge in complex gendered dynamics: culturally-structurally generated within patterned institutional-relational practices and norms that produce and reproduce gender inequalities, reinforcing the relationship between gender and poverty.<sup>4</sup> This relationship reflects 'the gendered nature of the processes leading to poverty and potential routes out of it'.<sup>5</sup> On this view, attempts to address such disadvantage at the level of policymaking can call for substantive cultural-structural change, and the enduring nature and extent of women's disadvantage in Northern Ireland speaks to a continuing failure of policymakers to deliver such change.

Where devolved government in the jurisdiction has attempted to address gender inequality directly at the level of strategic policymaking, its performance - as measured by intended outcome fulfilment - has been underwhelming.<sup>6</sup> This

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<sup>2</sup> On this, see, for example, H. McLaughlin, 'Women living in disadvantaged communities: barriers to participation', Belfast: WCRP, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.; see also, Morrow Gilchrist Associates, 'Evaluation of regional support arrangements for the voluntary and community sector', Morrow Gilchrist Associates: Belfast, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The definition of gender relied upon here is borrowed from recent work by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation: 'gender is defined as a constituent element of social relations based on perceived differences between the sexes, and as a primary signifier of power creating unequal access to resources. It is societal and structural in nature'. The paper also draws on that source's particular definition of poverty: 'when a person's resources (mainly material resources) are insufficient to meet their minimum needs (including social participation)'. 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, pp.6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>6</sup> On this, see the review of the 2006-16 gender equality strategy. It was found that, across all departments, only 37 out of the 126 outcomes or 'action points' in the applicable 2008-11 strategy action plans had been achieved, equating to 29 per cent. OFMDFM, 'Gender equality strategy 2006-2016 review', OFMDFM/NISRA, Belfast, 2013.

introduces the notion of political accountability into this debate. From a social justice perspective, holding government to account on this front can raise questions of, inter alia, inclusion, equality, recognition, redistribution and rights fulfilment.

Of course, in recent decades, government capacity to deliver on policymaking has in general been significantly constrained by Westminster austerity retrenchment rolled out following the 2008 global financial crisis. This austerity model has also had the effect of exacerbating the gendered dilemma at hand, precisely by disproportionately impacting women, making 'many women poorer and less financially autonomous',<sup>7</sup> while therein threatening women's wellbeing, equality and rights fulfilment. In a context of extended austerity, characterised by additional fiscal restraint and retrenchment, the prospect of more meaningful delivery on this front appears further threatened.

This gendered dilemma is further complicated by uncertainty associated with the impending withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union ('Brexit'). This includes legislative uncertainty over the future of extant rights protections for women<sup>8</sup> and economic uncertainty linked to forecast economic damage, which, it is suggested, could disproportionately affect women<sup>9</sup> and low-income households.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Fawcett Society, 'The impact of austerity on women, policy briefing', Fawcett Society: London, 2012, p.3.

<sup>8</sup> TUC, 'Women's Rights: the risks of Brexit', TUC: London, 2016; and, TUC, 'Women workers' rights and the risks of Brexit', TUC: London, 2016. It is projected that the rights of women part-time workers and temporary workers may be particularly at risk of repeal.

<sup>9</sup> M. Müller, 'We should ensure women's rights are safeguarded in the Brexit negotiations', LSE: London, 2016. [Online]. Available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/11/23/we-should-ensure-womens-rights-are-safeguarded-in-the-brexit-negotiations/>. This projection is based on the gendered nature of recent economic shocks, particularly the United Kingdom recession-austerity model that followed the 2008 global financial crisis. The idea is that any post-Brexit economic downturn 'would bear more costs on women than men, as they are more frequently situated in more vulnerable working and social positions'. A. Jenichen, 'What will Brexit mean for gender equality in the UK?' Aston University: Birmingham, 2016. [Online]. Available at: [www.aston.ac.uk/EasySiteWeb/GatewayLink.aspx?allid=285498](http://www.aston.ac.uk/EasySiteWeb/GatewayLink.aspx?allid=285498).

<sup>10</sup> I. Begg and F. Mushövel, 'The economic impact of Brexit: jobs, growth and the public finances', London School of Economics: London, 2016. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/europeanInstitute/LSE-Commission/Hearing-11---The-impact-of-Brexit-on-jobs-and-economic-growth-sumary.pdf>. See also, A. Armstrong et al. 'The EU referendum and fiscal impact on low-income households', NIESR, London: 2016.

Within this context, the question of policy prioritisation in respect of the gendered disadvantage at hand acquires added urgency. Yet the ongoing political impasse in Northern Ireland has inevitably interrupted the process of democratic institutional functioning and political accountability at the level of the regional, precluding government-driven strategic policymaking on substantive issues and the associated process of public consultation on proposals for remedial change. So, for example, key pending strategies remain on hold, such as those on gender equality and the economy, as does the opportunity for related consultative engagement.

In consequence, the opportunity remains severely constrained at this level for organisational actors and affected citizens to engage in consultative institutional process on the question of policy prioritisation and political accountability in respect of the gendered disadvantage under review. Responding to this institutional engagement deficit, the project underpinning this paper provided a policy platform expressly for disadvantaged women and organisational actors working with them to articulate their perspectives on this question.

To that end, the project made recourse to focus group engagement. Participants were asked to identify the policy concerns they perceived as requiring immediate prioritisation by policymakers - in the event of the resumption either of devolved government or, failing that, some measure of direct rule - in order to significantly improve opportunities and outcomes for disadvantaged women in the region.

The project's key findings, and the recommendations they inform, are set out below.

### **Key findings**

Participants identified the following as pressing concerns and important priorities, implicated in women's experience of disadvantage in Northern Ireland, requiring urgent attention from policymakers:

- the **gendered childcare dilemma** correlated with women's **educational exclusion, lack of economic participation, benefit dependency and poverty**;
- threats to the **sustainability of community-based anti-poverty women sector provision**, particularly the women centre delivery model, entailing the integration of **Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF)** delivery with educational opportunity and frontline support;
- the absence of meaningful gendered job creation policy targeting '**work that pays**' for **disadvantaged women** (i.e. employment that provides a genuine living wage indexed to the actual cost of living);
- the actual and projected **adverse impact of ongoing austerity** on women's poverty and vulnerability, particularly that linked to tax and benefit reform;
- austerity-aggravated **tenant vulnerability** in the social housing and private rented sectors, as manifest in rent affordability problems and housing-related poverty;
- persistent **unmet need/demand for different kinds of social housing**;
- the enduring relationship between **women's disadvantage and the legacy of the conflict**, particularly in respect of mental wellbeing;
- persistent **systemic underfunding of mental health** and its deleterious impact on service access and delivery as well as affected cohorts' life outcomes;
- a **systemically underfunded social care delivery** model, and its adverse impact on women as both service users and primary carers;
- **public service inadequacy** depicted as correlated with ongoing austerity retrenchment and a failure to plan on the basis of objective need;
- **misrecognition and non-accommodation of minority group need in public sector service design and delivery** (especially in health, education and housing), particularly with regard to black and minority ethnic (BME, including immigrant/refugee) and transgendered cohort need;



- the socioeconomic and infrastructural impact of reported **regional disparity in public sector investment**, especially in respect of rural and north-west regions; and,
- endemic **paramilitary 'bullying' and intimidation** at the level of the community.

These findings have informed the following recommendations.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Childcare affordability and women's lack of economic participation**

Government should seek to take proper account of the enduring relationship of prohibitive childcare costs in Northern Ireland to women's lack of economic participation and financial autonomy. Due consideration should be given therein to (i) austerity constraints on low-income households' ability to pay for childcare, especially in disadvantaged areas; and, (ii) sectoral concern that intervention under the proposed childcare strategy for the region may ultimately prove insubstantial.

#### **Childcare and job creation: work that pays**

While women's lack of financial autonomy may correlate with a lack of appropriate childcare, it may also correlate with a lack of meaningful employment (work that pays when childcare costs are factored in). In taking forward its childcare strategy, government should seek to give due regard to this nexus, integrating meaningful gendered job creation ambitions into its wider anti-poverty policy framework (such as would promote the notion of a genuine living wage linked to the actual cost of living).

#### **Women sector community-based provision**

Government should take seriously the case for sustained and enhanced women-only intervention at the level of the community - especially the integration of childcare, educational opportunity and frontline support services under the women centre delivery model - in addressing vulnerable cohort need, enhancing women's prospects of economic participation and progressing anti-poverty policy ambition. That undertaking should expressly incorporate proper

consideration of the projected cumulative adverse impact on the vulnerable of any cessation of the currently at-risk WCCF delivery model.

### **Women and austerity: cultivating a rights-based perspective**

Government should endeavour to properly capture and remedially address the cumulative impact of gendered austerity on women's equality and wellbeing, cultivating a robust rights-based perspective on this debate such as might allow it to identify more fully the wider social justice issues at stake.

### **Women's educational disadvantage**

It is recommended that government seek to develop a robust, integrated approach at the level of strategic policy development to properly identify and address the learning needs of educationally marginalised, disadvantaged women.

### **Disadvantaged women and health and social care**

Government should also seek to effect a more efficacious integrated, inter-agency delivery model across health and social care in pursuit of substantively improved outcomes for disadvantaged women, as both service users and primary carers. In pursuit of improved mental health outcomes for such cohorts, government should attend to the cumulative mental health impact of ongoing austerity and the legacy of the conflict, while also ring-fencing mental health from any further fiscal cuts under extended austerity.

### **Women and housing disadvantage**

Government should attend to the incidence of austerity-aggravated tenant vulnerability in the social housing and private rented sectors, as manifest in rent affordability problems and housing-related poverty. More generally, government should attend to the question of unmet demand for social housing and its impact on women's vulnerability.

### **Public service access: minority need and objective need**

Government should ensure proper recognition and accommodation of minority group needs and interests in public sector service design and delivery,

particularly in respect of black and minority ethnic (including immigrant/refugee) and transgendered cohort need. Due regard should be given therein to any significant disaggregated data gaps such as might threaten to undermine efficacy in such design and delivery. It is further recommended that government give due consideration to the case for planning public service delivery and investment based on objective need.

### **Community wellbeing: paramilitary intimidation**

Government should commit to enhanced intervention at the level of community to address the incidence and impact of paramilitary intimidation in disadvantaged areas, giving due regard therein to the case for enhanced community policing.

### **Provision for rural need: rural proofing**

In respect of all the policy prioritisation categories at hand, government should allow for robust rural proofing, providing investment and delivery mechanisms that properly address the interacting structural and other barriers to accessing services, correlated with historic underinvestment and associated chronic infrastructural shortfalls, which particularly impact women in rural poverty and isolation.

### **Equality responsive budgeting**

Government should take due account of the accountability and efficacy case for equality responsive budgeting - including gender budgeting - across all policy and planning processes, in pursuit of improved equality outcomes across variegated cohort need and section 75 grounds.

### **Gender disaggregated data gaps**

Government should attend to any gender disaggregated data gaps in the available evidence base such as might undermine the effectiveness of remedial intervention across the policy prioritisation categories identified in this paper.

### **Disadvantaged women's voices: inclusion in policy development**

Finally, across all of the policy prioritisation areas identified here, government should commit to providing for more meaningful stakeholder engagement with disadvantaged women across all implicated policy development, monitoring and review processes, ensuring their voices are explicitly heard and their perspectives, needs and interests properly recognised and accommodated.

## Section 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background

In 2012, the Department for Social Development, in partnership with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, launched a programme aimed at providing regional support for women in 'areas of greatest need' across Northern Ireland, defined as disadvantaged and rural areas.<sup>11</sup> More precisely, the programme sought to 'serve the needs' of disadvantaged women in these areas, defined as 'marginalised and isolated' individuals,<sup>12</sup> by 'enabl[ing] them to tackle disadvantage and fulfil their potential in overcoming ... exclusion'.<sup>13</sup>

The Women's Regional Consortium is funded under this programme and the brief for this small-scale project originated within that policy development context.

### 1.2 Overall aim and objectives

The overall aim of this paper is to explore, in snapshot format, the perspectives of a cohort of women - living and working in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland - on the question of policy prioritisation by government to address the needs and interests of disadvantaged women in the region (whether following the resumption of devolved government or, failing that, some measure of direct rule).

Three objectives apply:

- to capture and examine women's perspectives on government policy prioritisation to address the needs and interests of disadvantaged women in Northern Ireland;

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<sup>11</sup> DSD/OFMDFM, 'Review of government funding for women's groups and organisations', DSD/OFMDFM: Belfast, 2012, p.32.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.41.

<sup>13</sup> DSD/NISRA, 'Regional support for women in disadvantaged and rural areas: survey of women's groups analysis', DSD/NISRA: Belfast, 2013, p.3.

- to critically assess key structural relationships underpinning that disadvantage; and,
- to formulate policy recommendations aimed at addressing any identified substantive issues.

### **1.3 Methodology**

The methodological approach employed by the project combined a literature review with focus group engagement. The latter was organised by WSN, WRDA and Women's Centre Derry as follows:

- during June - September, Women's Centre Derry facilitated two focus groups: one at its Derry premises (with a cohort of black and ethnic minority women), and the other at Ballycolman Community Centre, Strabane; and, WRDA convened a group at its Belfast premises.

As previously noted, the selected cohort included both disadvantaged women and representation from organisational actors working with them.

### **1.4 Layout**

An evaluation of the research engagement dimension of the project follows in the next section. After that, the paper concludes with a summary of the project's key findings and policy recommendations.

## **Section 2 Women's Perspectives**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In February 2014, the Consortium marked its official launch with a women's sector conference in Belfast, which provided a policy platform expressly for disadvantaged women and organisations working with them. Delegates shared their perspectives on policymaking to effect remedial change to the former's poverty-associated experience of marginalisation, exclusion, disempowerment, isolation and vulnerability.

A plethora of concerns was raised about different kinds of disadvantage manifest in constrained agency, wellbeing, life chances and life outcomes.<sup>14</sup> The question of political accountability loomed large in respect of the enduring nature and extent of this gendered dilemma. And, an appeal was subsequently made for different kinds of meaningful government intervention to remedially address this status quo.

Articulation of these policy perspectives ultimately helped inform and shape subsequent Consortium policy-lobbying-advocacy engagement at the level of central and local government, as partners endeavoured to have these perspectives properly recognised, effect such remedial change and pursue such accountability.

By interrupting the process of government-driven strategic policymaking on substantive issues and associated formal consultation, the prevailing political impasse at Stormont has inevitably restricted the potential for any such policy-lobbying-advocacy engagement. So, for example, key pending strategies

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<sup>14</sup> Concerns raised correlated with the following factors: educational disadvantage; housing poverty, in-work poverty, inter-generational poverty and gender poverty (including 'hidden' poverty within the household and the poverty impact of ongoing austerity); gender differentials in mental health; impeded social mobility; and, a structurally-generated gendered childcare dilemma (associable with women's lack of economic participation, the cumulative unpaid work and time burden placed on women by the gendered division of labour in the private sphere and women's lack of financial independence).

remain on hold, such as those on gender equality and the economy, as does the opportunity for any corresponding formal consultative engagement with organisational stakeholders and affected citizen cohorts.

Responding to this engagement opportunity deficit, the project underpinning this paper sought to provide a further policy platform for disadvantaged women and organisations working with them. The overall aim of the project was to capture participants' perspectives on the question of policy prioritisation by government to address the disadvantage at hand (whether following the resumption of devolved government or, failing that, some measure of direct rule).

The remainder of this section sets out, analyses and contextualises these perspectives, while they are later summarised in Appendix 1.

## **2.2 Policy prioritisation: women's perspectives**

Participants' perspectives on policy prioritisation for disadvantaged women in Northern Ireland referenced a multiplicity of poverty-associated issues that cut across a broad range of key policy areas, inter alia, education, health, childcare, employment and welfare reform. From a gender perspective, such disadvantage may be broadly characterised as reflecting the wider relationship between gender and poverty.<sup>15</sup> Building on previous Consortium research findings and insight from the literature, these issues will be contextualised with particular reference to this relationship.

### **2.2.1 Disadvantaged women: gender, austerity, poverty, economic exclusion and community-based childcare/education**

In large part, participant exploration of policy prioritisation for disadvantaged women in Northern Ireland centred around social justice issues correlated with the complex interplay between the following factors: gender; poverty; austerity; restricted, or denial of, access to appropriate childcare and education/training, particularly at the level of the community; and, women's lack of economic

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<sup>15</sup> On this, see Bennett and Daly, *op. cit.*



participation. This sub-section briefly examines this interplay, contextualising these specific issues.

In the United Kingdom at large, the relationship between gender and poverty is such that gender remains a 'prime determinant' of poverty;<sup>16</sup> and, poverty in general, persistent poverty and recurrent episodic poverty are all 'more likely to involve women'.<sup>17</sup> Broadly, poverty is gendered in the sense that its occurrence, causes and consequences are profoundly affected by the manner in which social structures, comprising interacting economic, political and cultural institutional norms, rules and practices, differently position women and men.<sup>18</sup> This differential positioning informs gender roles and relations, producing/reproducing gender inequalities that, precisely by constraining women's economic participation, can 'carry a heightened risk' of poverty for women.<sup>19</sup> On this view, gender acts as a 'primary signifier of power creating unequal access to resources' between men and women, as institutionally mediated through patterned practices and relations within the family, the welfare state and the market (particularly the labour market) acting as 'systems of resource distribution'.<sup>20</sup>

Reflecting this wider relationship between poverty and gender, disadvantaged women in Northern Ireland can experience different kinds of marginalisation and vulnerability<sup>21</sup> associable with the impact of patterned cultural-structural gender inequalities in the private sphere and beyond. These inequalities can profoundly restrict life chances in respect of material distribution and status/power acquisition, while therein also adversely impacting agency, wellbeing and life outcomes.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.105.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp.6-7.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, McLaughlin, op. cit., Morrow Gilchrist Associates, op. cit.; also, B. Hinds, 'The Northern Ireland economy: women on the edge? A comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the financial crisis', WRDA: Belfast, 2011.

Crucially, the interacting factors underlying these experiences of disadvantage can include a correlation between inadequate childcare, poverty and the gendered division of labour. By ascribing to women the social role of unpaid primary carer and domestic labourer in the private sphere, this division can innately constrain their economic participation, increasing dependency on state support and/or partner income while therein heightening the risk of poverty.<sup>22</sup>

On this reading, the availability of affordable, accessible childcare appears as a prerequisite of effective intervention to address the gendered structural dilemma at hand.<sup>23</sup> Yet, worryingly, the Northern Ireland context continues to be characterised by high childcare costs that can significantly constrain both incomes and work choices for women as primary carers.<sup>24</sup>

Gendered exclusion of this kind in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction may also be significantly impacted by educational disadvantage,<sup>25</sup> which can profoundly restrict individuals' life prospects and wellbeing.<sup>26</sup> Community-based

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<sup>22</sup> The ultimate inherent danger in such exclusion from the labour market is that some women's agency might become totally restricted to the realm of the private sphere, characterised in terms of assumed role of 'economically inactive', unpaid primary care giver/domestic labourer.

<sup>23</sup> See McLaughlin, op. cit. See also, R. McQuaid, H. Graham and M. Shapira, 'Childcare: maximising the economic participation of women', Equality Commission for Northern Ireland: Belfast, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> McQuaid, Graham and Shapira, op. cit. Women continue to disproportionately participate in part-time, low paid and sporadic work, remaining over-concentrated in a relatively few job categories, which has the effect of keeping remuneration low and reinforcing the gender pay gap. This picture of gendered financial disempowerment is further complicated by the cumulative impact of other interacting contextual factors on women's financial autonomy, such as the devaluing/undervaluing of care work in policy development; lone parent status; the unfair/unequal distribution of income within households; and, gender differentials in debt. This list of complicating factors is developed by Bennett and Daly, op. cit. See, OFMDFM, op. cit.

<sup>25</sup> See McLaughlin, op. cit.; also, M. Feeley, 'Making good learning partnerships: examining the experience and potential with the community-based women's education sector and the further education sector', Equality Commission for Northern Ireland: Belfast, 2002. Educational disadvantage is a contested notion. As understood here, it is associated with the denial of equal 'access to and participation within different levels of formal education', correlated with other forms of disadvantage; K. Lynch and J. Baker, 'Working paper 28, equality in education: an equality of condition perspective', *Theory and Research in Education* 2005, Vol. 3, No.2: 131-164, p.1. Educational disadvantage is structurally generated. Because socio-economic status ('social class background') can be a major determinant of educational outcomes, including literacy levels, qualification and grading, and 'low income is a strong predictor of low educational performance', girls and women from poorer backgrounds may be at greater risk of this kind of disadvantage. The ambition to effectively tackle educational disadvantage and its implications thus ultimately calls for structural remedies. Lynch and Baker, op. cit.; and, D. Hirsch, 'Experiences of poverty and educational disadvantage', JRF: London, 2007, p.1.

<sup>26</sup> Equality in education 'matters' in the modern context precisely because 'education is indispensable for the full exercise of people's capabilities, choices and freedoms in an

women's education/training in Northern Ireland, as beyond, has tended to emerge and evolve in response to such educational disadvantage, with the express aim of accommodating associated unmet learner need.<sup>27</sup> Improved employment prospects for mothers through such education/training can translate as improved outcomes for children<sup>28</sup> and so, conversely, diminished prospects associated with the gendered dilemma under review may restrict wellbeing not only at the level of the individual but also the wider family.

Against this backdrop, research suggests how effective policymaker efforts to address women's disadvantage in the areas at hand can innately rely on the integrated availability at the level of community of appropriate childcare *and* learning pathways to potential employment, such as that provided under the aforementioned WCCF delivery model.<sup>29</sup> This model integrates childcare not only with educational opportunity but also frontline support, and its substantive remedial (anti-poverty) impact on beneficiaries' everyday lives - entailing improved outcomes both at the level of the individual and wider family - has been well established.<sup>30</sup> On this view, the enduring nature of unmet demand for this kind of community-based integrated provision may be associated with the enduring nature of the gendered disadvantage under review.<sup>31</sup> Troublingly, WCCF remains under threat of cessation.

Within this context, in recent years, the Consortium has welcomed government intent to intervene in the jurisdiction's childcare sector by advancing low cost childcare, with the express aim of 'improv[ing] gender equality ... by enabling mothers to join the workforce, return to work, remain in work, work the hours they want and progress in their careers'.<sup>32</sup> And, it especially welcomed the

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information-driven age'. J. Baker, K. Lynch, S. Cantillon and J. Walsh, *Equality: from Theory to Action*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2004, p. 141.

<sup>27</sup> Feeley, *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> McLaughlin, *op. cit.* For example, research shows that where such education and training of mothers results in higher levels of employment and wages, it can in turn result in higher attainment levels for their children. C. Lidell, 'The caring jigsaw: systems of childcare and education in Northern Ireland', Save the Children: Belfast, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> See, McLaughlin, *op. cit.*; also, Morrow Gilchrist Associates, *op. cit.*.

<sup>30</sup> Morrow Gilchrist Associates, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> For discussion of demand and impact: *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> OFMDFM, 'Delivering social change through childcare: a ten year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare 2015-2025', OFMDFM: Belfast, 2015.

accompanying intent to concentrate interventionist efforts in 'areas where there is currently little or no provision [particularly] disadvantaged' and rural.<sup>33</sup>

However, for the (obvious) reasons that follow, in a context of extended austerity there is a danger that any remedial childcare impact of this interventionist intent might ultimately prove insubstantial. First, this austerity model is associable with the apparent absence of a substantive budgetary commitment to underpin the proposed childcare strategy. Second, in disproportionately affecting women and the poor, making 'many women poorer and less financially autonomous',<sup>34</sup> this austerity model is also associable with actual and further projected constraints on childcare affordability and availability in low-income households.<sup>35</sup> This means that, in rolling out the proposed childcare strategy in a context of extended austerity, government would in effect be seeking to stimulate the enhanced economic participation of women in conditions associable with further regression in women's economic participation.

Of course, in a Northern Ireland context within which joblessness remains 'the most profound cause of poverty',<sup>36</sup> and childcare costs remain high and higher than in other parts of the United Kingdom,<sup>37</sup> efforts to progress towards economic independence for women are also innately hampered by the continued absence of robust anti-poverty gendered job creation strategising. Such intervention would be expressly aimed at delivering not just more jobs for women but also better jobs: so-called work that pays when childcare costs are

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Fawcett Society, *op. cit.*, p.3.

<sup>35</sup> Research gives some insight into the nature of austerity-impacted ability to pay (i.e. financial capacity) in the jurisdiction: while 43 per cent of households in the jurisdiction reported an anticipated inability to pay for unexpected bills (of £500), the United Kingdom figure stood at 33 per cent. Poverty and Social Exclusion, 'Northern Ireland: faring badly'. [Online.] Available at: <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/northern-ireland-faring-badly>. On the relationship between austerity and reduced childcare affordability, see, for example, S. Hall and C. Perry, 'Family matters: understanding families in an age of austerity', Family and Childcare Trust, London: 2013; and, C. Hannon (ed.), 'Living precariously: families in an age of austerity', Family and Childcare Trust, London: 2013.

<sup>36</sup> OFMDFM, 'Improving children's life chances - the first year report', OFMDFM: Belfast, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> McQuaid, Graham and Shapira, *op. cit.*

factored in, i.e. employment proffering a genuine living wage linked to the actual cost of living.<sup>38</sup>

In sum, this sub-section has set out and contextualised participants' perspectives on policymaking pertaining to the complex relationship between gender; poverty; austerity; women's lack of economic participation; and, constrained, or denial of, access to appropriate childcare and education/training, particularly at the level of the community.

We turn now to an examination of participant concern with regard to minority group need.

### **2.2.2 Recognition of minority group need: BME and transgender**

Participant discussion underscored the requirement for policy prioritisation to deliver proper recognition and accommodation of minority group need in public sector domains across different section 75 grounds. Particular emphasis was placed on transgendered and black and ethnic minority (especially migrant and refugee) cohort need. This sub-section considers what is at stake in this debate.

There is a worrying dearth of reliable disaggregated data on the everyday experiences of ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland in terms of outcomes in, inter alia, health, education, housing and benefit receipt, including the precise nature, extent and impact of their experiences of racism and racial inequality.<sup>39</sup> This lack of evidence frustrates attempts to accurately gauge the ethnic minority experience of poverty in the jurisdiction:<sup>40</sup> in the absence of sufficiently detailed disaggregated ethnic data, 'the situation of disadvantaged ethnic minorities cannot be ascertained but only guesstimated'.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Research affirms the disincentivisation of women entering or remaining in the labour market related to the contention that work does not pay when childcare costs were factored in. For example, it has been shown that austerity-associated tax, benefit and labour market change has 'placed further obstacles in the path of some mothers, who are unconvinced that work is economically viable', leading to reduced demand for registered fee-paying childcare. Hannon, op. cit., p.95.

<sup>39</sup> A. Wallace, R. McAreavey and K. Atkin, 'Poverty and ethnicity in Northern Ireland: an evidence review', Joseph Rowntree Foundation: London, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in ECNI, 'Racial equality', ECNI, 'Racial equality - policy priorities and recommendations (key point briefing)', ECNI: Belfast: 2014, p.41.

In turn, data deficits of this kind can threaten meaningful and effectual policymaking in racial equality.<sup>42</sup> This is because evidence-informed policymaking can better enable the development of strategies and services that explicitly recognise and take account of the diverse experiences and needs of different kinds of groups. Such deficits can ultimately frustrate the proper assessment and monitoring of inequalities and any associated remedial actions.<sup>43</sup>

Participants identified the following as being among the substantive interacting factors contributing to black and ethnic minority exclusion and marginalisation in the Northern Ireland case, particularly among migrant and refugee cohorts: inequalities in benefit receipt and lack of adequate benefit information; lack of cultural awareness and linguistic accommodation in public sector service provision, particularly in health; rural and social isolation; underemployment and unemployment depicted as correlated with visa restriction and perceived employer bias towards indigenes; lack of appropriate women-only advice/support provision; inadequate childcare support; and, housing vulnerability. This marginalisation was identified as compounded by a lack of participation by BME women in formal political life and public decision making.

The ambition of effective policymaking on minority need in Northern Ireland is further frustrated by a lack of disaggregated data across other equality grounds. This includes a lack of data on gender identity.<sup>44</sup> Against this background, participants explored the issue of the marginalisation of transgendered individuals in the region. This included anecdotal exploration of the particular and additional barriers to inclusion and accessing services that can be experienced by such individuals, especially regarding non-recognition and accommodation of cohort need in health. There was a general appeal for improved staff training across all public bodies to take better account of multiple

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, ECNI, 'Key inequalities in education, draft statement', ECNI: Belfast, 2015.

identities in policy planning and implementation, including direct service delivery.

So far, we have explored participant concern in respect of correlations between gender, poverty, austerity, childcare, education and women's lack of economic participation, as well as concern in respect of recognition and accommodation of minority group need. We turn now to participant concern over health and social care.

### **2.2.3 Disadvantaged women and health and social care**

Participants' exploration of policy prioritisation with regard to disadvantaged women and health and social care focussed in large part on posited correlations between austerity, underfunding and inadequacy of service delivery, poverty, gender, the legacy of the conflict and constrained wellbeing, particularly mental wellbeing.

Cohorts disproportionately impacted by ongoing austerity include the most vulnerable and the poor,<sup>45</sup> and its cumulative adverse impact on everyday lives has thus been partially characterised in terms of exacerbated vulnerability and poverty.<sup>46</sup> Because poverty can be a significant factor in mental ill health,<sup>47</sup> this exacerbation of poverty has, in turn, been associated with diminished mental wellbeing.<sup>48</sup> So, for example, research indicates how welfare reform has made 'the poorest people poorer and more miserable', as manifest in depression and suicidal tendencies.<sup>49</sup> Within this context, it has been further noted that this

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<sup>45</sup> See, for example, C. Beatty and S. Fothergill, 'Hitting the poorest places hardest: the local and regional impact of welfare reform', Sheffield Hallam University: Sheffield, 2013. See also, J. Ginn, 'Austerity and inequality: exploring the impact of cuts in the UK by gender and age', *Research on Ageing and Social Policy*, 1(1), 28-53. Further see H. Aldridge and T. McInnes, 'Multiple cuts for the poorest families', Oxfam: London, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 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.

<sup>47</sup> Research evidences poverty as both a contributor to, and consequence of, mental ill health. See, V. Murali and F. Oyeboode, 'Poverty, social inequality and mental health', *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, May 2004, 10 (3) 216-224.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, D. Gunnell, et al., 'The 2008 global financial crisis: effects on mental health and suicide', University of Bristol: Bristol, 2015; also, Liverpool Mental Health Consortium, 'The Impact of Austerity on Women's Wellbeing', LMHC: Liverpool, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> P. Cutler, 'Welfare reform: a tsunami of fear'. *The Guardian*, 24 September 2013. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/patrick-butler-cuts-blog/2013/sep/24/welfare-reform-study-debt-hunger-tsunami-of-fear>. See also, Gunnell et al., op. cit.; and, M. Knapp,

austerity model, precisely by disproportionately impacting women adversely and therein aggravating the relationship between gender and poverty, has had a 'devastating' impact on women's health,<sup>50</sup> including their mental wellbeing.<sup>51</sup> Research thus suggests some kind of correlation between austerity-driven fiscal restraint, poverty, gender and mental health.<sup>52</sup>

The question of the cumulative mental health impact of ongoing austerity in the Northern Ireland case remains distinctly underexplored in the literature.<sup>53</sup> That said, research does at least lend some general insight into how the wider recession model framing this austerity project may have cumulatively affected mental wellbeing in the jurisdiction: 'the ... economic recession has ... impacted significantly on the mental health of the population, creating an additional source of emotional distress for individuals and families'.<sup>54</sup>

Because, as noted, poverty remains a significant factor underlying mental ill health, this reported impact has been partially attributed to the way in which recession factors, such as wage restraint, unemployment and underemployment, may have exacerbated pre-existing mental ill health in the jurisdiction correlated with a 'legacy of high levels of social deprivation, poverty and unemployment'.<sup>55</sup> But it has also been partially attributed to the way in which recession-responsive austerity cuts may have exacerbated pre-existing mental ill health correlated with the legacy of ethno-national conflict in the jurisdiction, precisely by shrinking provision for conflict-related disorders<sup>56</sup> (as part of wider 'systemic and long-term' austerity-driven underfunding of mental health).<sup>57</sup>

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'Mental health in an age of austerity', *Evidence Based Mental Health Notebook*, 2012, 15: 54-55.

<sup>50</sup> 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, p.12.

<sup>51</sup> On this, see LMHC, op. cit.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> G. Wilson, et al., 'Regress? React? Resolve? An evaluation of mental health service provision in Northern Ireland', QUB: Belfast, 2015, p.25.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.v.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.92.

<sup>56</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.2, p.v. That said, there is a distinct dearth of research on the precise nature of the impact on mental health services and users of ongoing fiscal cuts in the Northern Ireland case: 'there has been little or no study of how the economic recession and the current strong



Women's experience of vulnerability in disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland may be characterised as related to this legacy of the conflict on mental wellbeing as follows. Disadvantaged individuals in the jurisdiction are in general 'much more likely' to cite an impact of the conflict on their everyday lives,<sup>58</sup> while women are more likely than men to report signs of mental ill health.<sup>59</sup> The 'burden' of conflict-associated anxiety and depression tends to fall disproportionately on women,<sup>60</sup> and disadvantaged women are in general 'at a greater risk of depression compared to less disadvantaged women'.<sup>61</sup> So, for example, the prescription rate for mood and anxiety disorders in 2013 for the region was 66 per cent higher for women than men, and twice as high in the most deprived areas than the least deprived.<sup>62</sup> The interaction between these factors suggests a correlation between disadvantage, gender, conflict and mental ill health in the jurisdiction.<sup>63</sup> And, by imposing 'substantial' treatment delays for conflict related disorders, austerity-driven underfunding of mental health in the jurisdiction potentially risks aggravating this correlation, further threatening the mental wellbeing of disadvantaged women.<sup>64</sup> Participants noted the adverse impact on affected cohorts, underscoring the intergenerational<sup>65</sup> nature and scale of the dilemma. Other associations between austerity and

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emphasis on financial restraint in health and social care commissioning have impacted on the development of mental health services. In essence, we have little empirical knowledge of the impact of these factors on service users in Northern Ireland, or the ability of frontline staff to meet their needs. Indeed, it is evident ... that there has been a lack of ongoing, systematic mental health research in and for Northern Ireland that can provide a strong evidence base for legal, policy and service development'. *Ibid.*, p.28.

<sup>58</sup> C. C. Kelleher, 'Mental health and "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland: implications of civil unrest for health and wellbeing', *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 2003; 57:474-475, p.474. See also, C. C. Kelleher, D. O'Reilly and M. Stevenson, 'Mental health in Northern Ireland: have 'the Troubles' made it worse?' *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 2003; 57: 488-492.

<sup>59</sup> Mental Health Foundation, 'Mental health in Northern Ireland: fundamental facts 2016', MHF: London, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> M. Tomlinson, 'The trouble with suicide mental health, suicide and the Northern Ireland conflict: a review of the evidence', DHSSPSNI: Belfast, 2007.

<sup>61</sup> M. Teychenne, K. Ball and J. Salmon, 'Educational inequalities in women's depressive symptoms: the mediating role of perceived neighbourhood characteristics', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Dec: 9(12): 4241-53, 2012.

<sup>62</sup> Mental Health Foundation, *op. cit.*

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Commission for Victims and Survivors, 'Towards a better future: the trans-generational impact of the Troubles on mental health', Commission for Victims and Survivors: Belfast, 2015.

<sup>64</sup> Wilson et al., p.27.

<sup>65</sup> See Commission for Victims and Survivors, *op. cit.*

women's diminished mental wellbeing were also noted, including stress and anxiety over welfare reform such as the rolling out of the universal credit programme.

In sum, in so far as the austerity model under review has a discernibly gendered poverty impact and poverty is a significant factor in poor mental health, we might reasonably posit some kind of relationship between gender, poverty, ongoing austerity and mental wellbeing in the Northern Ireland-specific case. And, the enduring mental health impact of the legacy of the conflict complicates this debate.

This picture of constrained wellbeing among disadvantaged women is further complicated by consideration of rural-specific contextual factors. This includes the cumulative adverse impact on everyday lives of the enduring legacy of infrastructural underinvestment in rural, and subsequent rural/urban socio-economic indicator differentials,<sup>66</sup> which research associates with aggravated isolation and disconnectedness.<sup>67</sup>

Women's mental wellbeing was depicted as further threatened by the nature of social care provision for vulnerable and older cohorts in the jurisdiction. Discussants cited systemic dysfunctionality in planning and delivery related to sustained underfunding and a lack of meaningful inter-agency collaborative practice. The impact of this reported dysfunctionality on affected cohorts' everyday lives was categorised as distinctly gendered. It was held that, as compared to men, women were 'paying the price' for such shortcomings in the form of constrained wellbeing, as the burden of care in compensating for underprovision tended to fall asymmetrically to them given the gendered division of labour in the private sphere: 'the whole system is being held together by what family members (usually women) are doing ... to make sure that ...

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<sup>66</sup> 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.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, M. Allen, 'Rural isolation, poverty and rural community/farmer wellbeing - scoping paper', Research and Information Service Briefing Paper, NIA: Belfast, 2014.

people are being cared for' (focus group contribution). Women were also cited as disproportionately impacted as service users given prevailing gender differentials in service engagement.

A fundamental systemic review of provision was subsequently called for to address this dilemma: '[government] need[s] to drastically rethink how [social care] is planned out and be accountable for how ... people are treated in the system' (focus group contribution). Cited compounding factors included the adverse impact on public service delivery of privatization and cohort stress over the prospect of further funding cuts.

In sum, participants identified different dimensions of health and social care as requiring immediate prioritisation by policymakers in order to fundamentally improve wellbeing outcomes for disadvantaged women in Northern Ireland. These concerns have been contextualised by consideration of the interaction between poverty, gender, austerity, the legacy of the conflict and wellbeing.

We turn now to the question of disadvantaged women and housing.

#### **2.2.4 Disadvantaged women and housing**

Participant exploration of policy prioritisation in respect of housing concentrated on issues that involved associations between austerity, disadvantaged women's housing circumstances in the social and private rented sectors, the experience of poverty and constrained community safety and wellbeing. These issues are contextualised below in discussion of these associations.

The relationship between housing circumstances and poverty is multilayered and complex.<sup>68</sup> Research affirms how, by restricting individuals' housing options, poverty can correlate with adverse housing outcomes.<sup>69</sup> Broadly, the idea here is that 'poor housing outcomes are fundamentally associated with

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<sup>68</sup> R. Tunstall et al., 'The links between housing and poverty: an evidence review', Joseph Rowntree Foundation: London, 2013.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.; see also R. Crisp, W. Eadson and A. While, 'Tackling poverty through housing and planning policy in city regions', Sheffield Hallam University/Joseph Rowntree Foundation: Sheffield, 2016.

income and wealth inequality'.<sup>70</sup> Research also suggests how, in turn, housing variables of cost, location, security, availability and quality may potentially impact (whether positively or negatively) individuals' experience of poverty and material deprivation.<sup>71</sup>

Like the relationship between gender and poverty, the relationship between gender and housing involves structural negotiation: 'housing [is] one of the vehicles through which gender relations are mediated and sustained'.<sup>72</sup> On this view, housing processes, systems and opportunities are 'embedded within' gendered structural and institutionalised relations of power.<sup>73</sup>

Although the interaction between gender, housing and poverty remains underexplored,<sup>74</sup> research does suggest that, as compared to men, women can have 'greater sensitivity' to housing disadvantage, for example, due to early parenthood and lone parent status.<sup>75</sup> Ongoing austerity in the United Kingdom complicates this picture. As observed, this model has disproportionately impacted women, making many women poorer and less financially independent. Associated housing vulnerability has been noted. So, for example, research on the Northern Ireland case affirms 'strong associations' between this model, shifts in rent affordability and the experience of homelessness among female headed lone parent households, particularly in the private rented sector.<sup>76</sup> Participant discussion underlined these associations.

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<sup>70</sup> A. Wallace, 'Housing and communities' inequalities in Northern Ireland', University of York: York, 2015, p.20.

<sup>71</sup> Tunstall et al., op. cit.

<sup>72</sup> P. Mayock et al., 'Women's homelessness and domestic violence: (in)visible interactions', in P. Mayock and J. Bretherton (eds), *Women's Homelessness in Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2016, p.138.

<sup>73</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>74</sup> For example, certain gender aspects of the security of housing remain underexplored; Wallace, op. cit., p.57.

<sup>75</sup> Bennett and Daly, op. cit., p.26. On gender and housing disadvantage, see L. Vickery, 'Deepening disadvantages in housing markets for women', *Local Economy* 27(8), 2012, pp.796-803.

<sup>76</sup> S. Fitzpatrick, et. al., 'The homelessness monitor: Northern Ireland 2013', Crisis: London, 2013, p.vii.

Austerity has also placed considerable restrictions on the scope for government intervention in the housing market to address 'substantial' unmet social housing demand in the region.<sup>77</sup> Discussants explored the question of the impact of this undersupply on tenant and household wellbeing. Most commonly, that impact was characterised in terms of mental and physical ill health affecting both adults and children, such as stress associated with overcrowding.

To compound matters, in a context of extended austerity that includes projections of additional constraints on household income in the jurisdiction,<sup>78</sup> further housing vulnerability is forecast:

[already introduced austerity] ... measures will have ongoing consequences in the years ahead, and, as other welfare reform measures are phased in, the problems of housing affordability for many low income households in [Northern Ireland] ...are likely to remain.<sup>79</sup>

Research identifies the availability of affordable, adequate and stable social housing as a 'foundation' for economic prosperity<sup>80</sup> and, in turn, 'thriving' and 'safe' communities.<sup>81</sup> Participants discussed the impact of persistent unmet demand for such housing. Housing related factors cited as impacting community safety and wellbeing included poor planning of housing stock location associated with tenant experience of infrastructural and service shortfalls in childcare, health, education, transport, recreation and community support. Community wellbeing in disadvantaged areas was also identified as fundamentally compromised by endemic paramilitary intimidation, categorised as a 'dictatorship' of bullying:

people are uncomfortable with calling it 'paramilitaries' because that is giving legitimacy to their bullying of communities... ..it's a dictatorship of bullying, young kids being recruited into gangs based around drug crime and violence. [It] is affecting all

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<sup>77</sup> NIHE, 'Waiting lists', NIHE, Belfast: 2015 [Online]. Available at: [http://www.nihe.gov.uk/waiting\\_lists](http://www.nihe.gov.uk/waiting_lists)

<sup>78</sup> See, C. Beatty and S. Fothergill, 'The impact of welfare reform on Northern Ireland: a research paper', NICVA: Belfast, 2013.

<sup>79</sup> Beatty C. et al. (2014). 'Monitoring the impact of recent measures affecting housing benefit and local housing allowances in the private sector in Northern Ireland – final report', Sheffield Hallam University: Sheffield, p.xi.

<sup>80</sup> Centre for the Study of Social Policy, 'Affordable housing as a platform for improving family well-being: federal funding and policy opportunities', CSSP: Los Angeles: 2011.

<sup>81</sup> California Department of Housing and Community Development 'Housing and family economic well-being', CDHCD: Los Angeles: 2013.

communities, not just PUL (Protestant, unionist and loyalist). Gangs going under the banner of 'dissidents' are operating exactly the same way in CNR (Catholic, nationalist and republican) communities. Drugs and related crime, break-ins, fear of violence from people using drugs, older women feeling especially vulnerable to being assaulted and robbed (focus group contribution).

Austerity-associated retrenchments in community policing were cited as compounding factors in this debate.

Additional factors cited as compounding this experience of housing related poverty and diminished wellbeing included the following: women's lack of participation in community and housing planning; a general lack of consultation on housing planning in Protestant areas; inadequate regulation and accountability in the private rented sector; government failure to invest in housing on the basis of objective need; failings in shared housing and interface provision; unaddressed structural safety issues in tower block accommodation (north Belfast cited as particularly impacted); underprovision for Catholic cohorts identified as related to an undersupply of available land; and, regional disparity in infrastructural underinvestment (rural and north-west, especially Strabane, cited as distinctly neglected).

Participants subsequently proposed remedial action for stakeholders to take due account of these issues. This included appeals for enhanced accountability and transparency at the level of policy and practice; social housing planning based on 'real community need'; enhanced community planning and investment directed solely at deprivation; adherence to a principle of fairness in regional infrastructural investment; more meaningful engagement with affected cohorts, to include meaningful consultation on housing at the planning/design stage; and, greater investment in community policing.

### **2.3 Section summary**

This section sought to capture and contextualise project participants' perspectives on the subject of policy prioritisation to accommodate disadvantaged women's interests and needs. As we have seen, identified

priorities cut across a broad range of policy areas, addressing the multidimensional nature of this disadvantage. In contextualising these concerns, we examined the structurally generated nature of this disadvantage, exploring the complexity of the cultural-structural relationship between gender, poverty and other interacting factors. As has been implied, because such disadvantage is associated with patterned gendered inequalities that cut across the private sphere, the market and the welfare state, efforts to remedially address it may fundamentally rely on the prospect of substantive structural-institutional intervention and change.

Following on from this analysis, the paper concludes in the next section by laying out some recommendations to take account of the concerns and issues raised.

### Section 3 Conclusion

The overall aim of this brief paper was to capture the perspectives of a cohort of women, living and working in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland, on the subject of policy prioritisation in respect of disadvantaged women's needs and interests. In providing this policy platform, the project responded to the constraints placed by the ongoing political impasse in the region on stakeholder opportunity to hold government to account for, and seek remedial address to, this disadvantage.

As we have seen, participant prioritisation addressed the multidimensional nature of this gendered dilemma, targeting substantive remedial intervention and change at the level of the socio-economic and beyond. In contextualising this concern, we have explored both (i) the cultural-structural nature of this disadvantage, by examining the wider relationship between poverty and gender; and, (ii) how certain factors - such as austerity - can intersect with and aggravate this relationship.

There is a compelling social justice case to be made - framed in normative discourse of inclusion, equality, recognition, redistribution and rights fulfilment - for policymakers to address the gendered dilemma at hand. Yet, as noted, the attempt by devolved government in the region to deliver on gender equality at the level of strategic policymaking proved distinctly underwhelming. Scepticism remains as to the likelihood of policymakers addressing this dilemma in more meaningful ways going forward, whether following the resumption of devolved government or, failing that, some measure of direct rule.

This scepticism is informed by consideration of two contextual factors that loom large at the level of the structural. The first is extended austerity, characterised by further severe restraint on government capacity to deliver and further cuts to state income, constraining the economic wellbeing of already disadvantaged women. The second is Brexit-associated risk of economic damage and attendant risk to gender equality and wellbeing in low-income households.<sup>82</sup> In

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<sup>82</sup> Supra notes 8, 9 and 10 apply



this precarious structural context, where the scale of the policy challenge at hand appears greater and the prospect of more effective remedial intervention to help meet that challenge appears more remote, the question of political accountability in this debate becomes even more urgent.

These observations have informed the formulation of policy recommendations to address the subject at hand. These recommendations are set out below following a summary of the project's key findings.

### **Key findings**

Participants identified the following as pressing concerns and important priorities, implicated in women's experience of disadvantage in Northern Ireland, requiring urgent attention from policymakers:

- the **gendered childcare dilemma** correlated with women's **educational exclusion, lack of economic participation, benefit dependency and poverty**;
- threats to the **sustainability of community-based anti-poverty women sector provision**, particularly the women centre delivery model, entailing the integration of **Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF)** delivery with educational opportunity and frontline support;
- the absence of meaningful gendered job creation policy targeting '**work that pays**' for **disadvantaged women** (i.e. employment that provides a genuine living wage indexed to the actual cost of living);
- the actual and projected **adverse impact of ongoing austerity** on women's poverty and vulnerability, particularly that linked to tax and benefit reform;
- austerity-aggravated **tenant vulnerability** in the social housing and private rented sectors, as manifest in rent affordability problems and housing-related poverty;
- persistent **unmet need/demand for different kinds of social housing**;
- the enduring relationship between **women's disadvantage and the legacy of the conflict**, particularly in respect of mental wellbeing;

- persistent **systemic underfunding of mental health** and its deleterious impact on service access and delivery as well as affected cohorts' life outcomes;
- a **systemically underfunded social care delivery** model, and its adverse impact on women as both service users and primary carers;
- **public service inadequacy** depicted as correlated with ongoing austerity retrenchment and a failure to plan on the basis of objective need;
- **misrecognition and non-accommodation of minority group need in public sector service design and delivery** (especially in health, education and housing), particularly with regard to black and minority ethnic (BME, including immigrant/refugee) and transgendered cohort need;
- the socioeconomic and infrastructural impact of reported **regional disparity in public sector investment**, especially in respect of rural and north-west regions; and,
- endemic **paramilitary 'bullying' and intimidation** at the level of the community.

These findings have informed the following recommendations.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Childcare affordability and women's lack of economic participation**

Government should seek to take proper account of the enduring relationship of prohibitive childcare costs in Northern Ireland to women's lack of economic participation and financial autonomy. Due consideration should be given therein to (i) austerity constraints on low-income households' ability to pay for childcare, especially in disadvantaged areas; and, (ii) sectoral concern that intervention under the proposed childcare strategy for the region may ultimately prove insubstantial.

#### **Childcare and job creation: work that pays**

While women's lack of financial autonomy may correlate with a lack of appropriate childcare, it may also correlate with a lack of meaningful

employment (work that pays when childcare costs are factored in). In taking forward its childcare strategy, government should seek to give due regard to this nexus, integrating meaningful gendered job creation ambitions into its wider anti-poverty policy framework (such as would promote the notion of a genuine living wage linked to the actual cost of living).

### **Women sector community-based provision**

Government should take seriously the case for sustained and enhanced women-only intervention at the level of the community - especially the integration of childcare, educational opportunity and frontline support services under the women centre delivery model - in addressing vulnerable cohort need, enhancing women's prospects of economic participation and progressing anti-poverty policy ambition. That undertaking should expressly incorporate proper consideration of the projected cumulative adverse impact on the vulnerable of any cessation of the currently at-risk WCCF delivery model.

### **Women and austerity: cultivating a rights-based perspective**

Government should endeavour to properly capture and remedially address the cumulative impact of gendered austerity on women's equality and wellbeing, cultivating a robust rights-based perspective on this debate such as might allow it to identify more fully the wider social justice issues at stake.

### **Women's educational disadvantage**

It is recommended that government seek to develop a robust, integrated approach at the level of strategic policy development to properly identify and address the learning needs of educationally marginalised, disadvantaged women.

### **Disadvantaged women and health and social care**

Government should also seek to effect a more efficacious integrated, inter-agency delivery model across health and social care in pursuit of substantively improved outcomes for disadvantaged women, as both service users and primary carers. In pursuit of improved mental health outcomes for such cohorts, government should attend to the cumulative mental health impact of ongoing

austerity and the legacy of the conflict, while also ring-fencing mental health from any further fiscal cuts under extended austerity.

### **Women and housing disadvantage**

Government should attend to the incidence of austerity-aggravated tenant vulnerability in the social housing and private rented sectors, as manifest in rent affordability problems and housing-related poverty. More generally, government should attend to the question of unmet demand for social housing and its impact on women's vulnerability.

### **Public service access: minority need and objective need**

Government should ensure proper recognition and accommodation of minority group needs and interests in public sector service design and delivery, particularly in respect of black and minority ethnic (including immigrant/refugee) and transgendered cohort need. Due regard should be given therein to any significant disaggregated data gaps such as might threaten to undermine efficacy in such design and delivery. It is further recommended that government give due consideration to the case for planning public service delivery and investment based on objective need.

### **Community wellbeing: paramilitary intimidation**

Government should commit to enhanced intervention at the level of community to address the incidence and impact of paramilitary intimidation in disadvantaged areas, giving due regard therein to the case for enhanced community policing.

### **Provision for rural need: rural proofing**

In respect of all the policy prioritisation categories at hand, government should allow for robust rural proofing, providing investment and delivery mechanisms that properly address the interacting structural and other barriers to accessing services, correlated with historic underinvestment and associated chronic infrastructural shortfalls, which particularly impact women in rural poverty and isolation.

### **Equality responsive budgeting**

Government should take due account of the accountability and efficacy case for equality responsive budgeting - including gender budgeting - across all policy and planning processes, in pursuit of improved equality outcomes across variegated cohort need and section 75 grounds.

### **Gender disaggregated data gaps**

Government should attend to any gender disaggregated data gaps in the available evidence base such as might undermine the effectiveness of remedial intervention across the policy prioritisation categories identified in this paper.

### **Disadvantaged women's voices: inclusion in policy development**

Finally, across all of the policy prioritisation areas identified here, government should commit to providing for more meaningful stakeholder engagement with disadvantaged women across all implicated policy development, monitoring and review processes, ensuring their voices are explicitly heard and their perspectives, needs and interests properly recognised and accommodated.

## Appendix 1

### Summary: policy priorities identified by project participants

#### **Educational disadvantage**

- Unmet demand for integrated community-based childcare and women's education/training
- Childcare and financial support to facilitate vulnerable women's participation in education/training

#### **Underemployment/unemployment and poverty**

- Gender discrimination in the labour market
- Accessible and affordable childcare to stimulate women's economic participation and financial empowerment
- Gender poverty, including 'hidden poverty' within the household
- Job creation aimed at delivering work that pays for women, addressing women's benefit reliance and in-work poverty
- Growth in zero-hour contracts
- Public sector reliance on employment agency staff
- Social injustice of universal credit
- Not-fit-for-purpose government employment schemes

#### **Public services**

- Transport infrastructure inadequacy, particularly rural
- Mental health shortfalls
- Affordable social housing underprovision
- Infrastructural and service support in rural and north-west, addressing perceived regional investment bias (Strabane cited as particularly neglected)
- Service privatisation and attendant issues
- Investment on basis of objective need
- Underfunding of community-based provision
- Belfast City Council targeting of deprivation
- Corporation tax rethink to prevent loss of public sector monies
- BME need in housing, education, health and social welfare, including need for interpreter services and multilingual advice

#### **Child wellbeing**

- Early years intervention and support
- Familial support at the level of the community
- Primary level investment to deliver requisite levels of child support
- Community-based pre- and after-school provision and staffing levels
- Universal free childcare
- Professionalisation of childcare sector

#### **Health, social care and wellbeing**

- Systemic underfunding of health and social care
- Dysfunctionality in social care system

- 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
- Inaccessibility of services, particularly for rural and vulnerable cohorts
- Relationship between poverty, the legacy of the conflict and mental health
- Over-medication of women at the level of community
- Mental health impact of paramilitary bullying
- Transgendered need

**Other societal issues**

- Gendered poverty impact of welfare reform and wider austerity
- Section 75 compliance shortfalls
- Voluntary and community sector funding crisis
- Private rented and social housing sectors: problems of cost, location, security, availability and quality
- Unmet diverse housing need
- Shared housing dilemma
- Interface housing investment
- Lack of consultation in housing planning
- Tower block safety
- Paramilitary bullying
- Narcotic use and related crime
- Violent criminal activity
- Community policing
- Abortion legislation