



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

## **Response to: Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Funding Model: Consultation Document**

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## **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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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 perspectives articulated in focus group, interview and questionnaire engagement, reflecting the views of the regional membership bases of the Consortium partners.

## **2. General comments**

**2.1** The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Department of Justice's 'Voluntary, community and social enterprise funding model: consultation document'.<sup>2</sup>

**2.2** This paper sets out a social justice case for enhanced gender responsiveness under the proposed model - specifically, recourse to gender responsive budgeting - such as might allow government to take better account of the particular needs, interests and perspectives of vulnerable women in the criminal justice system at large, whether as witnesses, victims or offenders. To substantiate that case, the response draws on research concerning the complex relationship between gender, poverty, crime and the emergence of gender-specific needs across witness, victim and offender cohorts.

As is well-documented, the agency, well being, life chances and life outcomes of vulnerable women in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland can be profoundly constrained by different kinds of marginalisation, exclusion and poverty.<sup>3</sup> Factors underlying this vulnerability include unfair cultural-structural

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Justice's 'Voluntary, community and social enterprise funding model: consultation document', DOJ: Belfast, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

gender inequality that cuts across the private and public spheres, rendering this vulnerability inherently gendered;<sup>4</sup> and, ongoing austerity has complicated this picture of cultural-structural injustice precisely by adversely impacting women and the most vulnerable disproportionately.<sup>5</sup>

Research suggests how these experiences of gendered disadvantage may be associated with vulnerable women's involvement in the criminal justice system, whether as witnesses, victims or offenders, reflecting different kinds of complex associations between gender, poverty, vulnerability, deprivation and crime.<sup>6</sup> These gendered associations can therein contribute to the emergence of distinct gender-specific needs within the criminal justice system at large. Crucially, research also suggests that the experience and outcomes of such justice system cohorts may be fundamentally constrained where these needs are not properly recognised and accommodated by government recourse to gender responsive provision,<sup>7</sup> particularly community-based variants.<sup>8</sup>

We recognise, of course, that extant DOJ provision at the level of community is not necessarily unresponsive to the needs of vulnerable women in the justice system. However, comparative research would suggest room for substantive improvement on this front.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the unpaid care and domestic labour burden placed on women by the gendered division of labour can fundamentally constrain their economic participation in the public sphere and financial empowerment, therein carrying a heightened risk of poverty for women. 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.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, J. Portes and H. Reed, 'Austerity has hit women, ethnic minorities and the disabled most', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2014; also, 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

<sup>6</sup> See, UNODC, 'Cross-cutting issues: gender in the criminal justice system assessment tool', UNODC, Vienna: 2010; Home Office, 'The Corston report: a report by Baroness Jean Corston of a review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system', Home Office: London, 2007; and, C. Webster and S. Kingston, 'Anti-poverty strategies for the UK poverty and crime review', Joseph Rowntree Foundation: London, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Home Office, op cit.

<sup>8</sup> Prison Reform Trust, 'Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment?', Prison Reform Trust: London, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, P. Radcliffe, G. Hunter and R. Vass, 'The development and impact of community services for women offenders: an evaluation research report', Institute for Criminal Policy Research: London, 2013.

The important point here is this: as is well established, gender responsive budgeting represents a robust policy mechanism through which government may comprehensively target such improvement.<sup>10</sup> This is because, by ‘measuring outcomes to ensure results’ across different gender categories, such budgetary endeavour explicitly entails the targeting of ‘equality of opportunity and outcome’ between men and women at all stages of the policy process.<sup>11</sup>

From this perspective, we would strongly exhort government to maximise any potential inherent to the consultation at hand to improve justice outcomes for vulnerable women as victims, witnesses and offenders, precisely by taking seriously the merit of integrating gender responsive budgeting into the proposed funding model.

The remainder of the paper will elaborate on this social justice imperative, setting out a plethora of associated concerns in respect of the following contextual gendered factors, which can impact the experience of vulnerable women as victims, witnesses and offenders:

**(i)** gendered dimensions of criminality trends in the jurisdiction, including increases in sexual offences and domestic abuse, of which women remain ‘overwhelmingly the majority of ...victims’;<sup>12</sup>

**(ii)** the relationship between the legacy of the conflict in the jurisdiction and gender-based violence: the conflict has been identified as having ‘masked the perpetration of domestic and sexual violence’, resulting in the ‘silencing of women’ as victims of such violence;<sup>13</sup>

**(iii)** gender differentials in ‘the problems that women bring into the criminal justice system’,<sup>14</sup> such as issues related to mental health,<sup>15</sup> which can ‘differ in type and severity from those experienced by men’;<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, S. Quinn, ‘Equality responsive budgeting’, ECNI: Belfast, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>12</sup> NIWEP, ‘An inquiry into the position of women in Northern Ireland since the peace agreement summary report’, NIWEP, Belfast, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> House of Commons Justice Committee, ‘Women offenders after the Corston report’, The Stationery Office: London, 2013, p.3.

(iv) gendered dimensions of the relationship between deprivation and crime;<sup>17</sup>  
(v) government failure to deliver substantive change to unfair gender inequalities in the jurisdiction, which is variously implicated in this debate, not least of all because ‘gender inequalities increase the risk of violence by men against women and inhibit the ability of those affected to seek protection’;<sup>18</sup>  
and, finally,  
(vi) government failure to maximise the potential of the wider women’s sector in the provision of integrated justice support services that address the complex and multifarious gender-specific needs of vulnerable women, whether as victims, witnesses or offenders.

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**

#### **Vulnerable women as offenders: gender responsiveness**

**3.1** This section appeals for gender responsive budgeting within the proposed model in respect of community-based interventions targeting the reduction of offending, such as might allow the department to (i) properly identify and take better account of the gender-specific needs of vulnerable women as offenders/recidivists; and, in consequence, (ii) more effectively target equality of opportunity and outcome between affected men and women in the offending/recidivist population at large.

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<sup>15</sup> K. Edgar, ‘Lacking conviction: the rise of the women’s remand population’, Prison Reform Trust: London, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> DOJ, ‘Women’s offending behaviour in Northern Ireland: a strategy to manage women offenders and those vulnerable to offending behaviour, 2010-13’, DOJ: Belfast, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, M. Hooghe, et al. ‘Unemployment, inequality, poverty and crime: spatial distribution patterns of criminal acts in Belgium, 2001-06’, *British Journal of Criminology*, December 1, 2010 [Online]. Available at: <http://bjc.oxfordjournals.org/content/51/1/1.abstract>

<sup>18</sup> WHO, ‘Violence prevention the evidence promoting gender equality to prevent violence against women’, WHO: Geneva, 2009.

The relationship between gender, poverty and offending/recidivism at the level of community remains complex.<sup>19</sup> Research evidences that gender remains a 'prime determinant' of poverty<sup>20</sup> and that poverty, in turn, remains a 'prime motivator' for female offending/recidivism in the jurisdiction, influencing both crime and victimisation rates at the level of community.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, research also evidences that women in the offending/reoffending population can often have complex poverty-associated or poverty compounded needs,<sup>22</sup> such as issues of mental health, substance abuse, employment and accommodation;<sup>23</sup> and, crucially, that these needs can 'differ in type and severity from those experienced by men'.<sup>24</sup> On this view, the complex needs of affected cohorts emerge as distinctly gender-specific.

If the complex needs of vulnerable women offenders remain gender-specific and speak to a wider relationship between gender, poverty and offending/recidivism at the level of community, then, as is well established, (i) 'most of the solutions to [such] offending lie outside prison walls'<sup>25</sup> in community based interventionism; and, (ii) addressing those needs in a gender responsive way remains a prerequisite of effective remedial policy endeavour on this front.<sup>26</sup>

Participants in the engagement processes informing this response universally underscored this substantive point, calling for a suitably robust delivery model at the level of community such as might provide for the gender-specific needs at hand in holistic and sustainable ways, i.e. integrated support services that address the multidimensional nature of that need. There are, of course, wider

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, K. Holtfreter, M. Reisig and M. Morash, 'Poverty, state capital and recidivism among women offenders', *Criminology & Public Policy*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp.185-208, 2004. We recognise that this relationship remains contested; on this, see: S. Kishor and K. Johnson K. 'Women at the nexus of poverty and violence: how unique is their disadvantage?' In: *Focus on Gender: Collected Papers on Gender Using DHS Data*. Kishor S, editor. ORC Macro: Calverton, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Bennett and Daly, op. cit., p.13.

<sup>21</sup> DOJ, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Holtfreter, Reisig and Morash, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Edgar, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> DOJ, op. cit.

<sup>25</sup> Prison Reform Trust, 'Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment?', Prison Reform Trust: London, 2013, p.1.

<sup>26</sup> Home Office, op cit.

implications to consider here, since case outcomes for female offenders can affect entire families given, for instance, women's ascribed social role of primary carer under the gendered division of labour: 'when women are sentenced to custody it has a profound impact on family life'.<sup>27</sup> These implications can thus include issues of children's education, development and mental health. Participants consequently also appealed for enhanced interventionism at the level of the wider family.

We recognise, of course, that DOJ is not unresponsive to the needs of vulnerable offenders at the level of community. For example, having committed to pursuing a 'gender-informed approach' to the problem of offending in the jurisdiction, the department has supported gender-specific delivery in the reintegration of offenders.<sup>28</sup> That said, we are concerned at the substantive limitations placed on fulfilment of that commitment, due in no small part to austerity-rationalised fiscal constraint, such as restrictions placed on the nature and scope of the latter.

Women remain a small minority of the offending/reoffending population with whom DOJ engages and this minority status can add to their vulnerability.<sup>29</sup> The evident danger for these women resulting from their minority status, particularly in times of austerity marked by deep cuts in public expenditure, is that their particular rights, perspective, interests and needs become overlooked in a criminal justice system dominated by consideration of majoritarian interests and needs (i.e. men's). The latest United Nations' report on the United Kingdom's record on women's rights highlighted this danger, urging government action to address sustained gender inequalities in the criminal justice system.<sup>30</sup> To compound matters, of course, in so far as it can aggravate gendered vulnerability, it might also be reasonably argued that

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<sup>27</sup> Prison Reform Trust, 'Reforming women's justice: final report of the women's justice taskforce', Prison Reform Trust: London, 2011, p.i.

<sup>28</sup> DOJ, 'Reducing offending', op. cit., p.5. Refers to women-only probation services that include an element of delivery at level of community in the women's sector.

<sup>29</sup> PBNI, 'Caseload statistics: quarter 1 2013/14', PBNI: Belfast, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> UN, 'CEDAW: concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland', UN: Geneva, 2013.



austerity may potentially also risk aggravating the relationship between gender, poverty and women's offending in the jurisdiction.

The crucial point here is this: the integration of gender responsive budgeting across all implicated policymaking may potentially enhance government targeting of improved justice outcomes for vulnerable women offenders. Adopting such an approach in respect of the proposals under review would expressly involve the department seeking to maximise the opportunity, which the consultation arguably represents, to better promote equality of opportunity and outcome between men and women in the offender/recidivist population at large, precisely by 'measuring outcomes to ensure results' across gender categories.<sup>31</sup>

### **Recommendation**

The Consortium recommends that, in pursuit of improved equality of opportunity and outcome between men and women in the offending/recidivist population at large, government should commit to robust gender responsiveness under the proposed funding model and across all other implicated policymaking, taking due account therein of the substantive remedial merit of gender responsive budgeting.

### **Vulnerable women as victims/witnesses: gender responsiveness**

**3.2** This section makes a case for robust gender responsiveness under the proposed model in respect of decision-making on victim/witness support at the level of community, such as might allow the department to **(i)** properly identify and take better account of the gender-specific needs of vulnerable women as victims and witnesses; and, in consequence, **(ii)** more effectively target equality of opportunity and outcome between affected men and women as victims and witnesses in the justice system at large.

This case is set out and exemplified by brief consideration of two gendered relationships that influence the nature of vulnerable women's experience as

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<sup>31</sup> Quinn, op. cit., p.2.

victims and witnesses of gender-based violence in the jurisdiction, impacting the nature of victim/witness support needs. First, we will consider gendered dimensions of criminality trends, specifically, the relationship between gender and increases in domestic abuse and sexual violence.<sup>32</sup> Second, we will consider the relationship between the legacy of the conflict and gender-based violence.<sup>33</sup>

The relationship between domestic abuse, sexual violence, gender, vulnerability and the experience of victims and witnesses in the Northern Ireland case remains complex.<sup>34</sup> Domestic abuse and sexual violence in the jurisdiction may be characterised as not only persistent, but also escalating,<sup>35</sup> and women remain 'overwhelmingly the majority of the victims' of such crime.<sup>36</sup> Cultural-structural gender inequality that cuts across the public-private sphere - as evident in gendered differentials between men and women in, inter alia, power, status, financial independence and the division of labour - can be a major factor underlying the manifestation and non-reporting of such criminality: 'gender inequalities increase the risk of violence by men against women and inhibit the ability of those affected to seek protection'.<sup>37</sup> And, it has been suggested that such associations speak to a 'strong link' between women's poverty-correlated vulnerability and their victimisation.<sup>38</sup>

This contextualised gendered picture of criminality is further complicated by the relationship between the legacy of the conflict, gender-based violence and

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<sup>32</sup> M. McWilliams and F. Ní Aoláin, 'Advancing gender equality in Northern Ireland: addressing domestic violence and human rights protections for women', KESS, Ulster University, Belfast, 2014.

<sup>33</sup> NIWEP, 'An inquiry into the position of women in Northern Ireland since the peace agreement summary report', NIWEP, Belfast, 2015; see also, McWilliams and Ní Aoláin, *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> McWilliams and Ní Aoláin, *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> According to police statistics, domestic abuse incidents in the jurisdiction 'have increased year on year since 2004/05', with just 2 exceptions; 28,189 incidents were recorded for the period October 2014 to September 2015, which is the second highest level recorded since 2004/05; while in respect of domestic abuse crimes, the 2014-15 figure of 13,599 crimes was the highest level recorded since 2004/05. PSNI, 'Domestic abuse incidents and crimes recorded by the police in Northern Ireland: quarterly update to 30 September 2015', PSNI, Belfast, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> NIWEP, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> WHO, 'Violence prevention the evidence promoting gender equality to prevent violence against women', WHO: Geneva, 2009, p.1.

<sup>38</sup> Webster and Kingston, *op. cit.*, p.4.

the victim/witness experience.<sup>39</sup> Research evidences a distinct relationship between the context and legacy of the ethno-national conflict that emerged in the jurisdiction and the nature, prevalence and non-reporting of such violence.<sup>40</sup> For example, by engendering, inter alia, fear and intimidation at the level of the individual, the family, the community and society at large, the conflict has been identified as having ‘masked the perpetration of domestic and sexual violence’, resulting in the ‘silencing of women’ as victims of such violence and the denial of access to justice.<sup>41</sup> Discussants in the engagement events informing this response anecdotally evidenced this relationship, citing cases of conflict-associated gendered violence and non-reporting of such violence linked to threats, fear and intimidation, concluding therein that such criminality remains essentially ‘hidden by paramilitaries’ (questionnaire respondent).

The important point here is this: both gendered relationships at hand - first, between gender and domestic/sexual violence; and, second, between gender-based violence and the legacy of the conflict – can give rise to distinct gender-specific support needs across victim and witness cohorts in the jurisdiction; and, as such, accommodation of those needs at the level of government expressly calls for some kind of gender responsiveness in all implicated policymaking. And, while we recognise that the policymaking of previous administrations in the jurisdiction endeavoured to address these needs in different ways and to different degrees,<sup>42</sup> as discussants anecdotally evidenced, much more remains to be done on this remedial front.<sup>43</sup>

Against this background, government should seek to maximise the opportunity that this consultation arguably represents to further improve

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<sup>39</sup> NIWEP, op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> For example, the recent consultation on domestic abuse and violence was, in part, intended to improve victim protection; Department of Justice, ‘Domestic abuse offence and domestic violence disclosure scheme – a consultation’, DOJ: Belfast, 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Discussants made the case for such gender responsive interventionism at the level of community as might meet the multifarious informational, awareness-raising, advice and guidance dimensions of such needs, to include accommodation of ethnic minority needs; for example, legal literacy provision aimed at informing vulnerable women of their rights.

justice outcomes for vulnerable women as victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system at large, particularly in cases of gender-based violence, endeavouring therein to take better account of all implicated gender-specific needs. And, for reasons already outlined, government efforts in this direction could potentially be fundamentally enhanced where gender responsive budgeting is embraced.

That said, the broader point here is this: because, as noted, unfair cultural-structural gender inequality that cuts across the private and public spheres remains a fundamental driver of violence against women,<sup>44</sup> meaningful realisation of government intent to address this type of criminality *will intrinsically rely on the extent to which policymaking can help deliver substantive remedial change to such gender inequality across society at large*. It is therefore profoundly worrying that, as the recent review of the current gender equality strategy for the jurisdiction affirms, there has been a distinct failure to date of government to deliver such substantive change.<sup>45</sup>

From this perspective, we would also exhort government to ensure that its consideration of the consultation options at hand on victim/witness support is explicitly conducted within wider cross-departmental social justice discourse on the question of remedying unfair cultural-structural gender inequality across society at large.

### **Recommendation**

The Consortium recommends that government take seriously the case for gender responsive budgeting in respect of victim/witness support under the proposed model, and across all associated policymaking, such as might allow it to maximise the potential of this and other opportunities to improve justice outcomes for vulnerable women as victims and witnesses, especially in instances of gender-based violence.

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<sup>44</sup> WHO, *op. cit.*

<sup>45</sup> The review found 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.

### **Commissioning: the risk to specialised women-only services**

**3.3** This section urges caution in respect of government intent to commission - as opposed to directly provide - support services under the proposed model for vulnerable women, whether women as victims, witnesses or offenders.

We note with concern that the consultation document includes a commitment to pursue justice outcomes through the commissioning of support services in the third sector under an outcomes-based accountability framework, consistent with the proposed modus operandi of the draft programme for government interventionism. The reason for concern is this: social justice commentators warn that a shift to outcomes-focused commissioning of this kind has the potential to threaten specialised women-only delivery for vulnerable cohorts. For example, the most recent United Nations' evaluative report on the United Kingdom's cumulative record on women's rights<sup>46</sup> concluded that recourse to such commissioning 'risks undermining' this kind of specialised provision.<sup>47</sup> That threat originates with difficulties that smaller organisations engaged in such provision can reportedly tend to have under such an outcomes-based commissioning model, as follows.

Defenders of outcomes-based accountability 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).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> UN, op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.3.

<sup>48</sup> T. Lowe, 'Soapbox: the sorry tale of 'outcome-based performance management'', Sluggo O'Toole [Online]. Available at: <https://sluggerotoole.com/2016/07/05/soapbox-the-sorry-tale-of-outcome-based-performance-management/>

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.<sup>49</sup>

The work of smaller providers of specialised women-only services can tend to directly engage with such 'complexity', reflecting the complicated nature of vulnerable women's 'needs and circumstances'.<sup>50</sup> And, it has thus been posited that outcomes-based commissioning contexts can tend to 'disadvantage' such providers, precisely by failing to take proper account of that complexity.<sup>51</sup>

Motivated thus, critics have called for funders of outcomes-based commissioning to be 'realistic' when evaluating applications as to what a given women-only specialised service might actually be capable of achieving, therein 'tak[ing] a broader and more flexible view of what success looks like'.<sup>52</sup> In addition, they have called for such funders to issue sufficiently nuanced guidance to such providers on the question of how precisely they might 'measure impact and outcomes for services' given the prevalence of such complexity.<sup>53</sup>

### **Recommendation**

We recommend that, in progressing the proposals at hand, DOJ give due consideration to addressing the particular risk posed to the provision of specialised women-only services under outcomes-focused commissioning, ensuring therein that it provides sufficient guidance to such providers on the question of measuring impact and outcomes, given the complexity of the social problems with which they engage.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> A. Hirst and S. Rinne, 'The impact of changes in commissioning and funding on women-only services', EHRC: London, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.xi.

<sup>53</sup> Loc. cit.

### **3.4 Maximising the potential of the wider women's sector**

This section considers the case for government to maximise the potential of the wider women's sector to deliver integrated justice support services at the level of community for vulnerable women, whether as victims, witnesses or offenders.

Research affirms that the wider women's sector in the jurisdiction is possessed of such skill, experience and knowledge as allow it to deliver effective and meaningful integrated provision at the level of community, taking account of the complex multifarious service support needs of vulnerable women and their families, including vulnerable cohorts in the criminal justice system.<sup>54</sup>

Discussants in the engagement events informing this response anecdotally evidenced this potential. Yet, they also pointed to and lamented a failure of successive administrations to maximise this potential in the provision of holistic justice system support services for vulnerable cohorts. Worse still, it was posited that government behaviour in this period, most notably, that associated with a reportedly sustained practice of under-resourcing, had contributed to a diminution of vital sector capacity on this front: 'in spite of the stated commitment of government to improve services for women and their families, the reality is services have been cut significantly' (questionnaire respondent). In a context of ongoing austerity characterised by severe fiscal constraint and further projected under-resourcing and service withdrawal, it was subsequently forecast that the threat to the retention of the aforementioned skill, experience and knowledge base remained profound.

From this perspective, participants appealed for government to take more seriously the question of maximising the potential of the wider women's sector to deliver vital justice support services at the level of community for vulnerable

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<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Morrow Gilchrist Associates, 'Evaluation of regional support arrangements for the voluntary and community sector', Morrow Gilchrist Associates: Belfast, 2015; also, Radcliffe, Hunter and Vass, *op. cit.*

women and their families, underpinned by requisite levels of sustainable resourcing.

### **Recommendation**

In taking forward the proposals, government should consider how best it might maximise the potential of the wider women's sector to deliver vital integrated justice support services at the level of community for vulnerable women and their families.

### **4. Conclusion**

This paper has set out a compelling social justice case for gender responsiveness in decision-making under the proposed model, such as might allow government to take better account of the particular needs, interests and perspectives of vulnerable women in the criminal justice system at large, whether as victims, witnesses or offenders. And, precisely because it can allow policymakers to more effectively achieve equality of opportunity and outcome between men and women in such delivery, an appeal for gender responsive budgeting was therein made.

The latter essentially entails a call for government to take more seriously the complex gender-specific needs of affected vulnerable cohorts, including those with multiple disadvantage. In a context of actual and further projected increases in austerity-associated gendered vulnerability, compounded by speculation about the poverty impact of Brexit associated economic uncertainty, that call is made more urgent.