

Women Delivering Change



Women's Regional
Consortium

Annual Report 2022

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Our Key Themes

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

We organise our work across six key themes:

Brexit

Childcare

Education, Training and Work

Health and Wellbeing

Lawfulness

Welfare Reform, Benefits and

Poverty



**Women's Regional
Consortium**

**Working
together in
partnership to
empower local
women in
disadvantaged
and rurally
isolated
communities**

**The
established
link and
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between
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and statutory
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women in
disadvantaged
and rural
areas**

Lead Partner Report

It is my pleasure to present to you as Lead Partner, the annual report of the Women's Regional Consortium.

These last almost 2 years have been difficult and strange for all of us; COVID has and will continue to affect the lives of so many women across Northern Ireland.

I am proud to say that despite the many obstacles that we have come through, the Consortium has continued to function and continue the work that is so important to women across the province.



The Consortium has continued to reach out and connect with women from many backgrounds promoting and sharing with decision makers their views and needs.

The importance of the Consortium is its diversity, range and skills base that each of the organisations bring to the table. Blended learning has enabled access to education for women including women with caring responsibilities, ill health and accessibility to IT.

We are also particularly proud that areas such as climate change, work life balance, domestic abuse to name but a few have all been responded to through consultation with women and the policy makers.

There is much that has been done but there is still much to do and by using social media channels, the Consortium Twitter and Facebook presence continues to grow and thus reach many women in NI.

Research is a vital tool in getting issues that affect women onto the desks of those who make decisions and again the Consortium has been busy highlighting the evidence received from local women on the impact of poverty and debt on their lives.

Brexit is another area that has the potential to impact in a negative way on the lives of women. Consortium partners are keeping it high on the agenda and making sure women's voices are not ignored.

The Consortium promoted that working together can have a massive impact on how people and lawmakers operate.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the Consortium Partners for their hard work and commitment and also the staff of the Department for Communities who continue to work closely with the Consortium to offer a worthwhile, valuable service to women across NI.

NORMA SHEARER, MBE TWN Chief Executive

The Partners

The Women's Regional Consortium is a coalition of seven women's organisations working together to empower local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities. Our members are:

Training for Women Network (Lead Partner)

Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network

Women's Resource and Development Agency

Women's Support Network

Women'sTec

Foyle Women's Information Network

Women's Centre Derry

Working together in partnership to empower local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities



The established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas

Education, Training & Work

Education, Training and Work is a broad theme with substantial scope. This reflects the value given to this key theme by our members, 81% of whom rated this theme as important to them. The provision of education and training programmes and providing research and an evidence base on the role of women in the labour market are work undertaken by all seven Consortium partners. We have all had to adjust the way we deliver services during the pandemic.

Women Centre Derry offers blended learning to enable access to education for all women including women with caring responsibilities and ill health. Women Centre Derry also offers childcare places for women with young children under 4 to engage in education. Using this blended learning plan Women Centre Derry delivered 30 level 2 qualifications to women and a Level 1 qualification to 186 women. From this cohort 53 women progressed onto further education, 53 progressed to employment and 82 women engaged in job searching. WRDA have taken a similar approach and are currently operating a hybrid delivery model incorporating both Zoom delivery and face-to-face delivery.

In response to demand for more information on climate change and the environment evidenced in the May 2021 membership survey we set up a Feminist Responses to Climate Change reading group. This new group was planned, designed, and delivered by the WRDA Communications and Membership Worker for the WRC utilising reading and visual material available for free. The group met for six weekly sessions in September and October 2021 and looked at climate change as a form of gender based violence. As part of our commitment to the key theme of Education, Training and Work the Feminist Responses to Climate Change Group Guide has been made publicly available on the WRC website. This allows any feminist group to run the sessions.



(An example of a social media post from our Twitter, @WRC_NI)

Education, Training & Work

The WRC aims to connect grass roots women with decision makers and ensure your views are taken into account when policy is made. As part of this work WSN submitted five responses in relation to Education, Training and Work on behalf of the Consortium:

- **Work-Life Balance Bill** – the Consortium welcomed proposals for legislation to improve work-life balance for workers and highlighted the greater impact of the pandemic for women. The response highlighted the importance of family friendly policies in overcoming gender stereotypes and in the promotion of gender equality.
- **Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill** – the Consortium welcomed proposals for introducing paid safe leave from work in situations of domestic abuse and for this to be a day one right.
- **Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill** – the Consortium welcomed proposals for creating a legal requirement for employers to grant a period of two weeks paid Parental Bereavement Leave for all employees experiencing the death of a child.
- **A Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland** – the Consortium's response focused heavily on the need to invest in care as a means to promote gender equality and the critical importance of the education and training provided by Women's Centres and the broader Consortium. These services are vital in tackling disadvantage, promoting gender equality and provide the most cost effective way of ensuring that local needs are effectively met plus ensuring the best outcomes for the communities they serve. The Consortium's consultation response called for much greater value and investment to be placed on these unique and trusted services.
- **Climate Change Bill** – WSN provided responses to two Climate Change Bills on behalf of the Consortium. The Consortium response to both Bills highlighted the need for a more Caring Economy which is based on gender equality, wellbeing and sustainability. This would prioritise care for each other and for the environment in which we all live and recognise that care jobs are green jobs.

At A Glance

81% of members rated Education, Training & Work as important to them

86% of respondents rated the level of information provided by the WRC as excellent or good

5 Consultation Responses

Education, Training & Work

The Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group is managed by Consortium partner, WomensTec. NIWBG's engagement with the Department for the Economy's (DfE) draft Skills Strategy went beyond a consultation response. Before the end of the consultation period, officials from DfE attended a NIWBG meeting where they presented the details of the Strategy and responded to questions and feedback from NIWBG members. At a later NIWBG meeting past the consultation period, we met with the leaders on the Strategy to further communicate our hopes for the Strategy. Much of what was discussed at both meetings was reflected in our consultation response - the Skills Barometer's inability to view economic value outside of productivity and the netting out of upskilling from the forecast of future skills requirements, gender segregation in apprenticeships and HLAs, the need for investment in care, improving precarious and low-paid jobs, the implementation of gender budgeting tools, and the importance of working towards a caring, green economy.

WSN presented to the Women's Budget Group conference on the issue of Climate Change in Northern Ireland. This followed a consultation on the Climate Change Bill as Northern Ireland is the only region of the UK not to have its own climate change legislation. The presentation reinforced the need for a caring economy which addresses issues of gender inequality.



The Four Nations Conference, Bringing a Caring Economy to the Four Nations: Making Gender Budgeting Work in Practice, held in May was hugely successful in sharing best practice across Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England. The purpose of the conference was to highlight the strength that comes from working together; keynote speaker Sarah Veale noted that despite the different policy contexts, it was essential that the diverse needs of each nation are understood for collaboration to be successful. The event, organised by the coordinators of each nation's Women's Budget Group, featured discussions around the status of gender budgeting in each nation, best practice in four nations collaboration, how to turn analysis and campaigning into policy change, and a panel on gender and climate justice in each nation. The feedback from conference participants recognised that these conversations helped those from different WBGs to gain a greater understanding of each nations' policy context.

Education, Training & Work

Women'sTec have continued our partnership with academics in Ulster University for our joint project that looks at the competency and capacity position on gender budgeting in Northern Ireland. At present, this work has involved an in-depth study into apprenticeships in Northern Ireland and how resources are both skewed towards men and boys and perpetuate gendered labour market segregation, a paper on this research and a paper outlining gender budgeting in a Northern Ireland context. Additionally, we put forward a motion on gender budgeting in the Women's Caucus, which received cross-party support in October 2021. Prior to the motion receiving support, Women'sTec met with representatives from every party to explain what gender budgeting is with the aim of building their knowledge and capacity to engage with the tool, to provide them with additional explanatory materials, and to promote the motion in the Women's Caucus.

When surveyed in May 2021 86% of partner's members rated the information they receive from the WRC as excellent or good. The core of information provided by the WRC is disseminated via email updates and social media. The WRC publishes a general Ezine every month which covers the work of all seven Partners with a focus on upcoming events, training and funding news. A separate monthly Lobbying, Policy and Research Bulletin is also issued to our membership. This update focuses on consultation responses, lobbying campaigns and primary research produced by WRC Partners.



**New
Discussion
Group**



**Feminist Responses to Climate
Change**
Starting September 2021
email info@wrda.net to register your interest

(An example of an information campaign delivered by the WRC)

At A Glance

**88% of
respondents
rated the
services they
receive from
the WRC as
excellent or
good**

**86% of
respondents
rated the level
of information
provided by
the WRC as
excellent or
good**

**12
Discussion
Group
meetings**

Welfare Reform, Benefits & Poverty

Welfare Reform, Benefits and Poverty is one of the Consortium's six key themes because Austerity has had a profoundly severe impact on women in Northern Ireland. Since 2010 women have shouldered 86% of the total burden of welfare cuts. 69% of members rated this key theme as important to them and this is reflected in the amount of anti-poverty work carried out by the Consortium Partners in the last year.

Women's Centre Derry have responded, consulted and engaged with political officials and lead various groups as part of this work. Rayna Downey, Outreach Project Worker for the WRC based in WCD, addressed a Universal Credit Cut rally held in Derry~Londonderry in September 2021. WCD also took part in a Welfare Mitigations panel discussion with ESF in January 2022.

Consortium Partner, WRDA is the secretariat for the Women's Policy Group and the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan focuses heavily on Welfare Reform, Benefits and Poverty. One of the four Pillars of the Plan is dedicated to economic justice and departmental briefings containing recommendations based on the plan were produced for each Stormont department. The briefings for the Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy have specific recommendations relating to Welfare Reform, Benefits and Poverty.



(Rayna Downey (WCD) speaks at a rally against Universal Credit cuts.)

The WRC aims to connect grass roots women with decision makers and ensure your views are taken into account when policy is made. As part of this work WSN submitted three responses to consultations and Government Appointed Reviews in relation to Welfare Reform, Benefits and Poverty on behalf of the Consortium:

Welfare Reform, Benefits & Poverty

- **Shaping future support: the health and disability green paper** - the Consortium's response to this Green Paper used evidence from engagement events with local women on Personal Independence Payment and a Consortium research paper on Universal Credit to provide information on how the benefit system can better meet the needs of disabled people and those with long term health conditions.
- **Review of Discretionary Support** – on behalf of the Consortium WSN has provided feedback to this Review on the restrictive eligibility criteria for accessing Discretionary Support, the fact that many people do not know about the help available through the Universal Credit Contingency Fund and the likely reasons for this and stressed the need for people on the lowest incomes to be able to have sufficient income to live on through the social security system.
- **Welfare Mitigations Review** – on behalf of the Consortium WSN has provided input to this Review on the importance of the existing welfare mitigations in Northern Ireland as well as the need for them to be strengthened to provide further protections specifically to help women who were so impacted by welfare reform.

“As long as my two kids are fed and watered I don't care if I eat.”

(Participant quote from WRC Research on the Impact of Austerity on Women, March 2019)



At A Glance

69% of members rated Welfare Reform, Benefits & Poverty as important to them

Keep the Lifeline Campaign

Cliff Edge Coalition Campaign

3 Consultation Responses

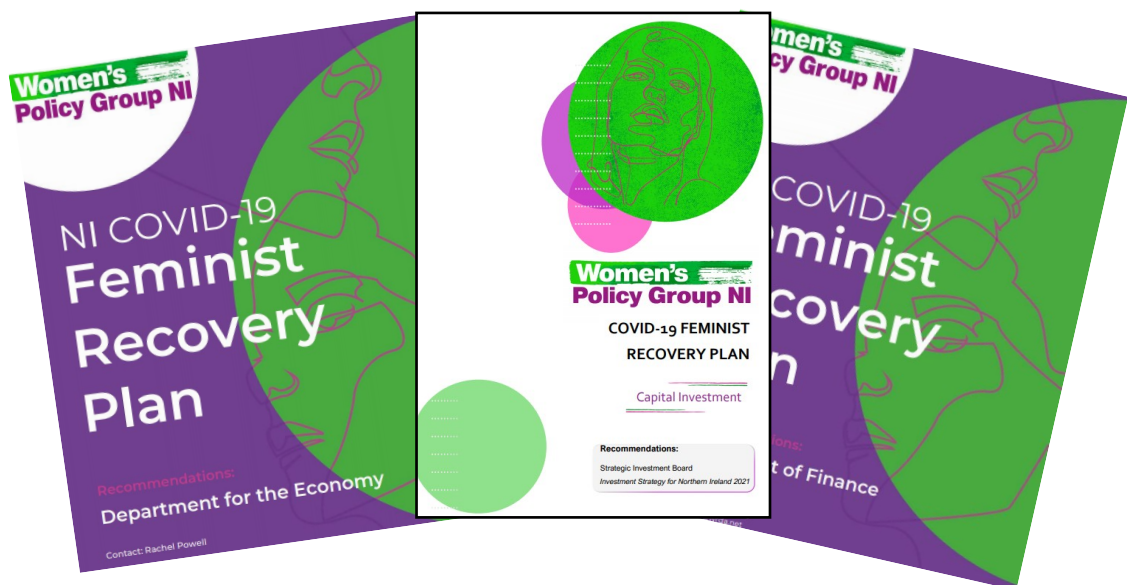
(An example of how our research is used to create social media campaigns to inform the public and decision makers.)

Welfare Reform, Benefits & Poverty

The Women's Regional Consortium is represented by Women's Support Network on a number of campaigns during the last year in relation to welfare reform, social security and poverty.

Keep The Lifeline

WSN continue to work with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and a coalition of other organisations across the UK on a campaign around the £20/week uplift to Universal Credit. WSN spoke to local women and gathered evidence on the impact of the loss of the uplift to their families. WSN summarised this evidence before the Westminster All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Universal Credit. The APPG were informed about the very negative impacts on women if the cut were to go ahead, the likelihood of a harsher impact in Northern Ireland reflecting the number of families with children and shared a number of quotes from local women on how it would impact on their everyday lives: *"This extra amount [Universal Credit £20/week uplift] helps me to maintain a certain level but there are no luxuries, it's just the basics! It's the cost of living, everything is going up, the cost of food, etc. So really it's not an extra if the cost of everything else has gone up. It just helps me to maintain a basic level of life. If they took it away, I'd really struggle."* In the run up to the Universal Credit cut in October 2021, WSN presented to Belfast City Council on the impact of the cut particularly on highlighting that the cut will hit people in Northern Ireland harder but will also hit women harder. On the day of the cut WSN attended a protest at Belfast City Hall and carried out media work on the likely impact of the cut.



(Feminist Recovery Plan briefings and departmental recommendations.)

Welfare Reform, Benefits & Poverty

Cliff Edge Coalition – WSN continue to work as part of the Working Group for the Cliff Edge Coalition on a campaign to extend the strengthen the welfare mitigations package in Northern Ireland. As part of the Coalition WSN has met with the Minister for Communities and written to the NI Executive Ministers and all the NI political parties on the urgent need to extend the mitigations legislation and the likely impacts if this did not happen. Following concerted action on this issue the Minister announced an extension of the mitigations legislation for three years. This is a hugely welcome move and will provide vital protections for many thousands of people in Northern Ireland including many women who were so negatively impacted by welfare reform changes. In announcing the extension of the mitigations legislation the Minister for Communities acknowledged the work of the Cliff Edge Coalition in getting these protections extended.

At A Glance

69% of members rated Welfare Reform, Benefits & Poverty as important to them

Keep the Lifeline Campaign

Cliff Edge Coalition Campaign

3 Consultation Responses

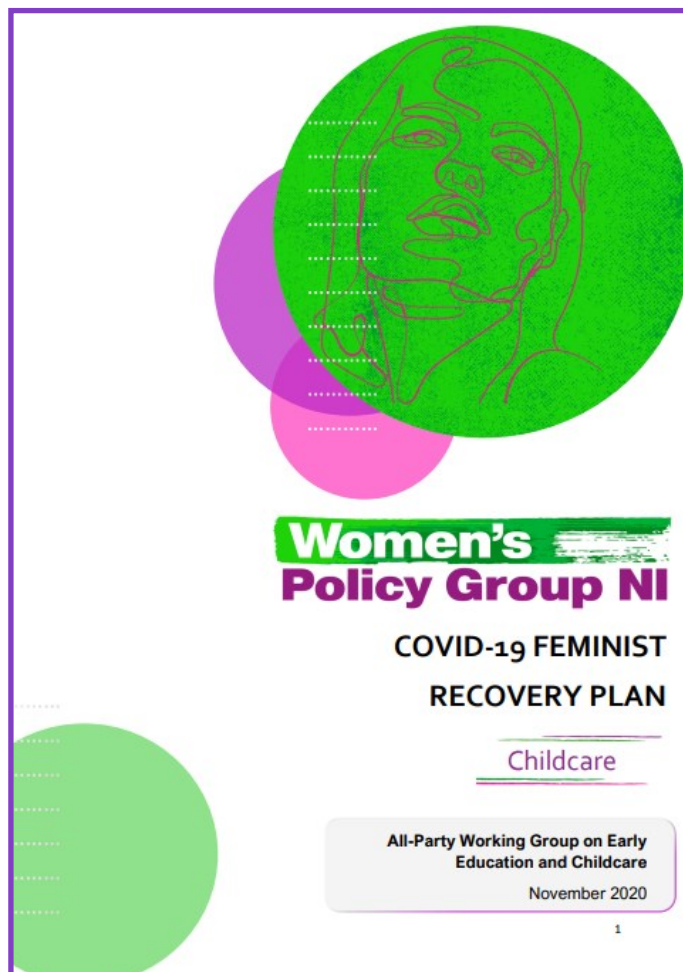


(Social media post by Women's Centre Derry demonstrating the importance of the £20 uplift to Universal Credit.)

Childcare

By making childcare one of our six key themes the Women's Regional Consortium is reflecting how central this is to the lives of women. In our most recent membership survey conducted in May 2021 44% of members rated childcare as important to them. The Women's Regional Consortium is represented by our partner organisation, Women's Support Network on the All Party Group (APG) on Early Education and Childcare and WSN provides information and updates to the APG on the childcare provided through the Women's Centres. All seven partner organisations aim to take account of childcare needs when planning events and training in recognition of the barrier the undue care burden creates for women.

The practical impact of this commitment can be seen in the work of our partner organisations. Women Centre Derry offers a Recover Rebuild and Renew programme to support children's development after the impact of Covid. This programme has been delivered to support 243 individual children. Women Centre Derry Creche filled 11,170 hours of childcare this year to enable women to have access to education, wellbeing and support services. Women Centre Derry also provides a BAME Advocacy support project supporting 68 individual children.

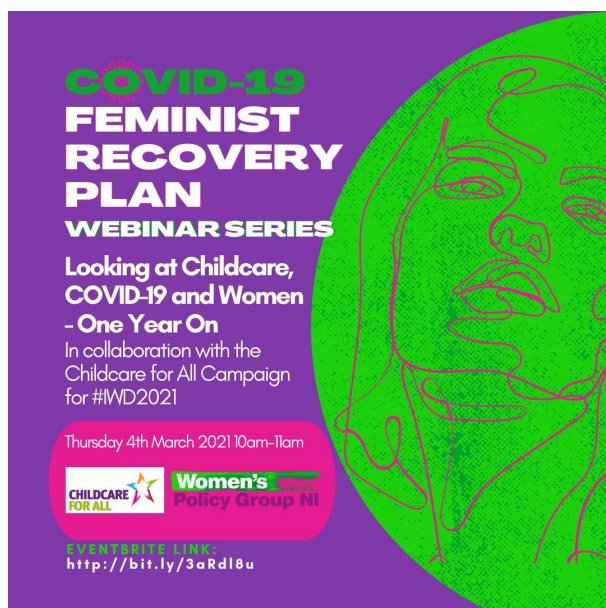


(Feminist Recovery Plan briefing on childcare for the All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare.)

Childcare



The Women's Regional Consortium is represented in the Childcare for All campaign by our partner organisation, the Women's Resource and Development Agency. WRDA is co-convenor of the Childcare For All campaign with Employers For Childcare. The campaign coalition is a network of organisations that have come together to call for universal, child-centred childcare that meets the needs of children, families, childcare workers and providers and helps create a more equal society. We have developed a Childcare For All Charter setting out our vision of a childcare system that is affordable, accessible, flexible, high quality, and which supports children's education and development. We also want to see the value of childcare work recognised with decent pay and terms and conditions. Over the course of the last year WRDA have continued our work on this campaign, including a focus on childcare in the Feminist Recovery Plan. As part of the webinar series that accompanied the launch of the Feminist Recovery Plan an event entitled, *Looking at Childcare, Covid-19 and Women* was held in March 2021.



(Social media advertisement for an event focusing on the impact of Covid-19 on childcare and women.)

At A Glance

**44% of
members
rated
Childcare as
important to
them**

**All Party
Group on Early
Education and
Childcare**

**11,170
Childcare
hours**

**Childcare for
All Campaign**

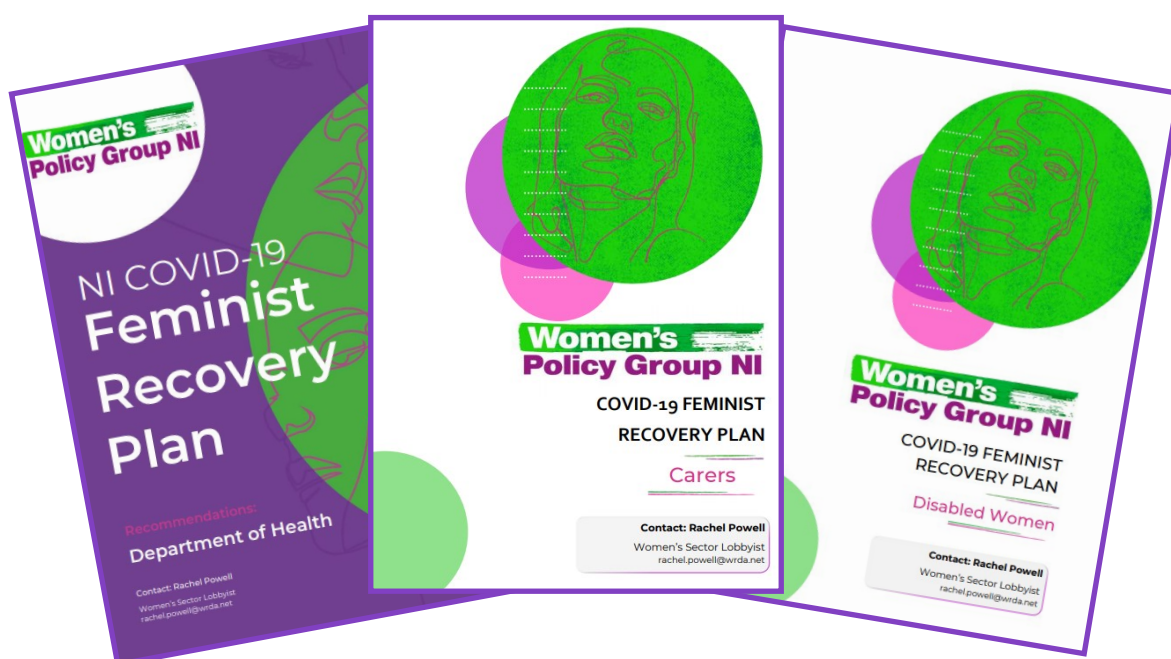
Health & Wellbeing

Health and Wellbeing was rated as important by 91% of members and is a key work area for many of the Partner organisations.

WRDA has completed Year One of its Maternal Advocacy and Support Project (MAS). This project is a partnership with WRDA and eight women's centres including another Consortium Partner, Women's Centre Derry. The project provides peer support groups for women who are experiencing perinatal mental health problems. As part of the project 97 mothers have been supported and an OCN level 3 Endorsed Course has been developed.

WRDA delivered 154 Breast, Cervical and Bowel Screening Awareness sessions to 1,309 participants. These sessions were aimed at women in disadvantaged and rural areas who have a lower uptake of screening than average. The Breast, Cervical and Bowel Screening Awareness programme developed by WRDA and funded by the PHA is specifically designed to overcome the barriers faced by women and improve health outcomes.

Women Centre Derry delivered wellbeing programmes to 154 women in the past twelve months. WCD also delivered several health focussed events including Mental Health Strategic planning. As part of the MAS project WCD have been running a support group and fed into the Ma's Project Our Lived Experiences Conference and the Ma's Project Executive Summary. WCD participated in island wide events relating to Health and Wellbeing through the National Women's Council of Ireland. This engagement included, Impact of Covid on Women, Violence Against Women and Impacts of Gender Based Violence in October 2021.



(Feminist Recovery Plan briefings and departmental recommendations.)

Health & Wellbeing

Foyle Women's Information Network approaches Health and Wellbeing in a holistic way, seeking to ensure that material needs are met and human connection maintained. This approach was particularly important during the pandemic when so many were facing financial hardship and isolation. Throughout the pandemic FWIN continued to serve the needs of marginalised and isolated women by posting monthly isolation gift packs and through signposting to a range of organisations and services that offer support to those unable to access food and essential supplies, unable to meet other basic needs, affected by domestic abuse, feeling isolated or struggling financially, and not sure where to go for help or advice.

The majority of care work in NI is undertaken by women. This was reflected in the response to the Future Planning Model prepared by Women's Support Network on behalf of the Consortium which called for increased representation of women on Partnerships Boards. The Consortium's response highlighted the need for a Caring Economy based on gender equality, wellbeing and sustainability as a way of addressing the crisis in the care sector.



(Siobhán Harding, Policy Worker for Women's Support Network speaking on BBC Spotlight.)

At A Glance

91% of members rated Health & Wellbeing as important to them

We take a holistic approach to Health & Wellbeing to serve the needs of marginalised and isolated women

Over 1500 Health & Wellbeing programme participants

Lawfulness

In 2021 the Women's Regional Consortium adopted a new key theme, lawfulness which was rated as important by 45% of members In our most recent membership survey. The partner organisations have delivered programmes and held events and focus groups looking at this key theme in detail over the past year. This work included the development of a new six session reading and discussion group looking at prison abolition. The group met fortnightly from April to June and discussed topics including Transformative Justice, Black Lives Matter and the policing response to Covid-19. We are grateful to Abolitionist Futures for providing the material used in the meetings.

Prisons and Police Abolition Reading Group



WSN provided a response to the new funding stream, Peace Plus Programme, designed to support peace and prosperity across Northern Ireland and the border counties building upon the work of the previous PEACE and INTERREG programmes. Following a number of focus group sessions with local women and using the evidence provided in these sessions WSN stressed the importance of a community-led approach to peace building and reconciliation work. WSN highlighted concerns that a large proportion of the funding available through this programme may not be available to the voluntary and community sector for this work.



(FWIN's visit to to the United Nations Conference in New York)

Lawfulness

FWIN have also explored the concept of lawfulness, what it means to be 'lawful' and what benefits there are to living in a lawful society, with participants who took part in the WICT programme delivered by FWIN. Furthermore, a number of participants on this program took part in the visit to the United Nations Conference in New York to represent the women of NI on the Committee for the Status of Women in discussions geared at pushing women's rights forward on a global scale.



(Some examples of our social media campaign around the key theme of Lawfulness)

At A Glance

45% of members rated Lawfulness as important to them

WICT Programme

FWIN Delegation to the United Nations Conference

6 Session Reading Group

Brexit

Brexit has the potential to roll back on the rights of all women in NI but it has particular impacts for rural women and women in border communities. Consortium Partner, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network, has therefore been taking the lead in making sure women's voices are heard in relation to Brexit and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

NIRWN availed of the opportunity in the past year to contribute to civic society engagement with the UK government, Lord David Frost; the Secretary of State Brandon Lewis; the NIO and Maroš Šefčovič, Vice president of the European Commission EU to discuss the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland its real and potential impacts on women and other core issues of importance to our membership.

In addition we have met with:

- The co-chairs (UK-EU) of the Specialised Committee on Ireland/Northern Ireland
- The EU Commission
- The European Parliament
- Benelux and Nordic Embassies (UK)
- German and French Embassies (UK)
- Representatives from Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and Japan based in UK
- Bipartisan United States Ad hoc Committee to Protect the Good Friday Agreement

Issues we have raised include:

- lack of gender balance at civic engagements
- social unrest is happening outside of Belfast too
- community organisations need strategic support and consistent resourcing
- communication needs to be clear & unambiguous
- from engagement needs to flow action
- when 'tweaking' the Protocol there should be no diminution of rights & rights should be viewed in a broad sense taking account of NI as it is now
- Community cohesion needs repaired

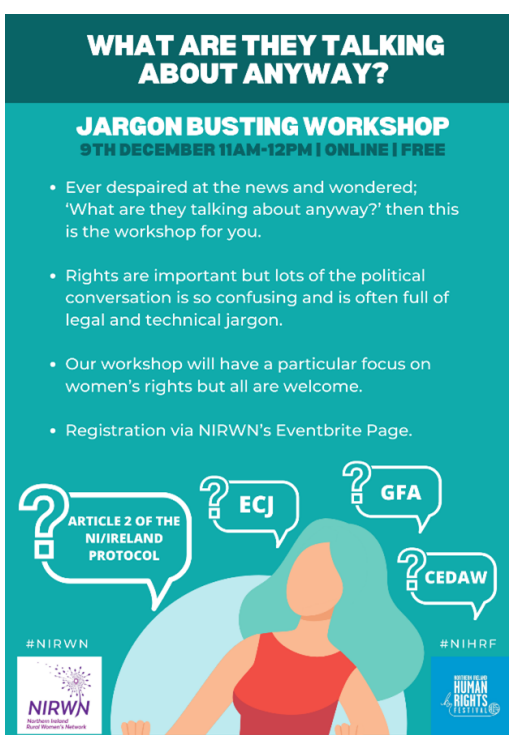
We have made representation to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. The focus of the evidence was: How is the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland affecting communities? Also giving evidence was Dr Tom Kelly, media commentator and former vice chair of the SDLP and Jonathan Powell, former Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Tony Blair (1997-2007). The Committee's final report has now been published and includes NIRWN's evidence. The full report is available on the WRC website.

Brexit

In an effort to support and inform members who were struggling to keep up with Brexit and Ireland/NI Protocol developments NIRWN hosted a jargon busting workshop. Ever despaired at the news and wondered 'What are they talking about anyway?' then this is the workshop for you. The UK exit from the EU has the potential to impact on the rights we currently enjoy and take for granted; maternity rights, working hours etc and we are still waiting on the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement

Commitment for a Bill of Rights NI. Rights are important but lots of the political conversation is so confusing and is often full of legal and technical jargon.

The aim of NIRWN's workshop is to help you feel confident to join in the conversation about your rights. We will look at recent changes and explore their relevance to us; and consider the International standards and what might be important for us into the future. We will cover the technical jargon e.g. Article 2 of the NI/Ireland Protocol, CEDAW, ECJ and participants will receive a copy of our jargon buster to keep.



(An example of our social media campaign about Brexit)

At A Glance

Civic Society Engagements on Brexit and the Protocol's real and potential impacts on women

Presented to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland

Making sure women feel confident to join the conversation about your rights

Women Delivering Change

Notes

Notes

Working together in partnership to empower local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities

The established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas

Women Delivering Change



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WRC is funded by the RISP programme



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**



Department for
Communities