



# Engagement



Women's Regional  
**Consortium**

**Quarterly Zine  
July-September  
2025**



## INTRODUCING OUR QUARTERLY ZINE ENGAGEMENT EDITION

By Megan McClure | WRDA

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Several pieces in this Zine reflect on the vitalness of engagement.

Our first piece from the Women's Support Network looks at engaging with women to push back against the planned anti-poverty strategy. The piece from NIRWN reflects on how engagement cuts across all areas of the Network's activities. WRDA has engaged with professional and lived experience experts to develop a new guide designed to support politicians, public bodies, and third sector organisations in recognising and resisting the far-right's manipulation of EAWG campaigns to promote xenophobic, racist, and Islamophobic agendas. Women's Centre Derry discusses the barriers women face to having our voices heard whilst WomensTec discusses how engagement is key to bringing the next generation of women into non-traditional trades. Finally, Women's Budget Group NI offers a summary of their work including engaging with politicians to drive the use of gender budgeting.

We hope you find the information contained in this edition useful as we continue to ensure a voice for women from disadvantaged and rural areas.

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# WOMEN'S VOICES ON THE DRAFT ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY: ENGAGEMENT, FEEDBACK, AND THE CALL FOR ACTION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Siobhán Harding | Women's Support Network

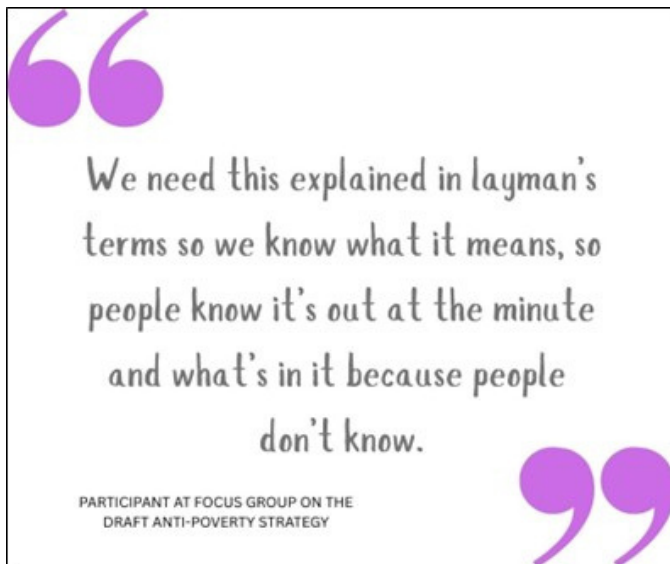
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The consultation on a draft Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland (a Strategy we've waited 19 years for!) is the perfect example of the need for and importance of engagement with those with lived experience.

The draft Anti-Poverty Strategy was published for consultation in June 2025 and the Women's Regional Consortium alongside colleagues from Ulster University, the NI Anti-Poverty Network and Save the Children NI produced a Toolkit to help people engage with the consultation. This included a short explainer document about the content of the Strategy, a series of quotes from women about the Strategy for use on social media, a video providing a brief overview of the problems with the Strategy and a simple feedback form to allow people to respond with their views on the Strategy. The Toolkit is available here: <https://niapn.org/have-your-voice-heard/>



We undertook a series of focus group discussions with women on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy using the Toolkit. Engagement sessions were held in Shankill Shared Women's Centre, in Atlas Women's Centre and with a group of women in HM Prison Hydebank Wood. What was immediately evident at these events was that the women who attended did not know there was an Anti-Poverty Strategy out for consultation and they did not know anything about what was contained in it. What was also clear was that the contents of the Strategy needed to be explained to them in a way they could understand and engage with and that providing feedback to the consultation needed to be simpler than the official online survey.



Once the contents of the Strategy were explained in an accessible way the women who attended the focus groups were very vocal about the draft Strategy. They were disappointed that the lived experience of those living in poverty was not reflected in the draft and that it contained little in the way of new actions to address rising poverty levels here. Following the engagement exercises 145 people completed the feedback form and an analysis of these results provided some important information for the consultation as follows:

- **78% felt that the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy would make no difference to the financial hardship and poverty that people experience.** A further 15% reported they were unsure if the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy would make a difference and only 7% felt that it would make a difference.
- **The majority of respondents (82%) rated the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy as 'Poor'** with a further 15% rating it as 'Average'. Only 3% rated the draft Strategy as 'Good'.
- Respondents were asked to provide suggestions for what they thought should have been included in the Strategy and they provided many ideas of what could have been contained in the draft that would really make a difference to poverty levels here including free school meals for all pupils, introducing a price cap on school uniform costs, increasing the value of social security benefits to meet the cost of living, scrapping the two-child limit and ending the five-week wait in Universal Credit.



As part of the engagement process a focus group event was held with a representative from the Department for Communities so that they could hear the thoughts of women on the content of the draft and then feed back to the Minister for Communities and to the NI Executive the views expressed about the Strategy.

The engagement process using the Toolkit was really important in gathering the thoughts and experiences of women living in financial hardship and poverty who are most likely to be impacted by the contents of the Anti-Poverty Strategy. This important feedback was included in the Women's Regional Consortium response to the consultation and shared with other organisations to include in their responses including with the Women's Policy Group.

The importance and value of this engagement cannot be understated and it provided vital feedback to Government on what will be an important 10-year Strategy to address rising poverty levels in Northern Ireland. However, it must go beyond engagement. The NI Executive must not only listen to the results of the engagement process but take action on what they have heard otherwise the resulting Anti-Poverty Strategy will be ineffective in addressing the growing and damaging problem of poverty in Northern Ireland.



You can read the Women's Regional Consortium response to the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy on the Consortium's website which includes the results of the Toolkit engagement exercises here:

<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Womens-Regional-Consortium-response-to-draft-Anti-Poverty-Strategy.pdf>



# ENGAGEMENT FOSTERS ACTIVE PARTICIPATION AND CULTIVATES A SENSE OF BELONGING FOR RURAL WOMEN

Paula McAliskey | NI Rural Womens Network

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As a regional, membership based organisation established in September 2006 'to promote and support rural women', NI Rural Women's Network engages regularly with our 600 plus members. We continually listen to the issues affecting rural women and rural women's groups; hear what is working well in their communities and identify what support NIRWN can provide. Some of these issues include Childcare & Caring Responsibilities, Rural Transport, Social Isolation, Health & Wellbeing, Digital Poverty, etc.

Engagement is key at NIRWN and cuts across other programmes within NIRWN such as Women's Spaces, Women Breaking Barriers and the more recent Access to Resilience programme. NIRWN staff identify groups within the programmes who can avail themselves of engagement support from our Engagement Officer

To support this, we have helped members build confidence in using online platforms. This has led to greater willingness to engage virtually, while still recognising that some groups prefer in-person visits. By offering both options, we have improved flexibility, enabled regional delivery through a single online session, and supported members in balancing other commitments. Our online events and training now regularly attract participants from all six counties, broadening our membership and extending our reach into more rural areas.



Engagement with other service providers is central to increasing awareness and improving access to support for our members. We actively host and network with partner organisations to share good practice and keep rural women informed on key issues such as Caring, the Cost of Living, the Bill of Rights NI, the EVAWG Strategic Framework, and the Department of Health's Review of Breast Cancer Services.

We ensure rural women are regularly informed about government consultations and sectoral surveys, empowering them to engage with critical social and economic issues. This increases their opportunities to connect, share experiences, and access support, while ensuring their perspectives are represented in government strategies and consultations.



Through active member engagement, NIRWN supported three of our members in representing the voices of rural women at a special sitting of the Women's Parliament in Stormont in February. Key topics addressed included Violence Against Women and Girls, Access to Health Services for Women, Unpaid Work and Caring Responsibilities, and Affordable Childcare.

Through focus groups, we amplify the voices of rural women—especially those from marginalized and underrepresented groups—enabling them to influence decisions that directly affect their lives and contribute to a more inclusive society. Recent topics have included Free School Meals and Uniform Grants, Women, Skills & Barriers to Work, and Night-Time Travel & Personal Safety in rural areas.

For NIRWN, effective engagement with rural women is crucial to the sustainability of our organisation. With regular ezines and a strong social media presence, we share relevant information that affects their day-to-day lives and we signpost support and services to support them. We host annual events for International Day of Rural Women and International Women's Day, providing opportunities for members to learn about our work, discuss issues affecting their lives, and connect with key service providers and each other.

**Our aim is to enhance the participation and recognition of rural women as we work towards an equitable society—one where rural women are visible, influential, and valued. Engagement with our members is crucial to achieving this vision.**





# ENGAGING TO TACKLE THE FAR RIGHT: WRDA LAUNCHES GUIDE TO CHALLENGE FAR-RIGHT CO-OPTION OF EVAWG NARRATIVE

By Megan McClure | WRDA

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) is proud to announce the launch of a timely new resource: "Challenging the Far Right Weaponisation of Ending Violence Against Women and Girls". This guide is designed to support politicians, public bodies, and third sector organisations in recognising and resisting the far-right's manipulation of EVAWG campaigns to promote xenophobic, racist, and Islamophobic agendas.

## Why This Guide Matters

Across Northern Ireland and beyond, far-right groups have increasingly sought to hijack the language of campaigns to tackle violence against women and girls to target Black and minority communities, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and Muslim communities. These efforts hinder EVAWG advocacy, and spread racist and Islamophobic misinformation and hate.

The guide was developed by WRDA in consultation with professional and lived experience experts and offers a clear and principled refutation of this dangerous co-option. The guide aims to equip political and civic leaders and organisations with the tools to push back against these narratives and to reaffirm a feminist, inclusive, and anti-racist approach to ending violence against women and girls.

## What's Inside

- A framework for consistent and values-based messaging
- Practical advice for engaging on social media, issuing press releases, and speaking to the media
- Key facts that counter misinformation linking migration to VAWG
- Recommendations for further reading and advocacy

The guide does not address sectarianism or antisemitism, as the co-option of ending VAWG by the far right is not a feature of these forms of hate in the Northern Irish context.

## WRDA's Commitment

Founded in 1983, WRDA been a stalwart champion for women's equality and participation in society. Operating from a feminist perspective and informed by lived experiences, WRDA continues to tackle structural inequalities through advocacy, campaigning, health promotion, and training. This new resource is a continuation of WRDA's work to ensure that EAWG efforts remain focused on justice, safety, and equality for all women and gender-diverse people—free from hate and manipulation.

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***“They use the language of ‘violence against women and girls’ as a smokescreen to cover for the racism. It's an effort to turn all these conversations about violence into conversations about migration, It's very much punching down and using women and girls as the boxing gloves to do the punching. And we don't appreciate that in the slightest.”***

***Women's Sector Lobbyist Elaine Crory (quoted in The Detail)***

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## Get Involved

Membership of WRDA is free and open to all women and gender-diverse individuals and groups. Join us in standing against the weaponisation of EAWG and in building a more inclusive and equitable society.



# ENGAGEMENT MATTERS: BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS FOR WOMEN

By Rayna Downey | Women's Centre Derry

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For too many women across Northern Ireland, having their voices heard is still a battle. Engagement is never straightforward. Barriers continue to block women from fully participating in their communities, in education, in politics, and with statutory agencies.

Time and again, women are shut out of the very spaces where decisions are made about their lives. That is why tools such as gender budgeting are not just “nice to have”, they are vital. Policies and spending must reflect women’s real priorities, not just tick boxes. Equality will only become reality when women are at every decision-making table.

## The Barriers Women Face

Every woman’s story is different, but the challenges are painfully familiar:

- Women are still under-represented in political, civic, and community leadership.
- Many lack the confidence, knowledge, or connections to navigate policy and institutional processes.
- The legacy of conflict and paramilitarism continues to silence women through fear, intimidation, or trauma.
- Rural women face geographical isolation and fewer resources, making participation harder.
- A “one-size-fits-all” approach ignores the reality of women’s diverse needs and backgrounds.

These barriers don't just stop women from engaging, they risk silencing voices that are essential to building a fairer society.

## **The Power of Lived Experience**

At the Consortium, we know that real change only happens when women are heard. That means:

- Amplifying voices: sharing the stories of women who have spoken up, creating role models who inspire others to do the same.
- Co-designing solutions: working alongside women so that public bodies ask the right question, "What do you need to engage?", instead of making assumptions.
- Women's lived experience is knowledge. It is expertise. And it must shape the policies that affect them.

## **Working Together for Change**

The Women's Regional Consortium is committed to making sure women are not an afterthought in policy. By working with public sector bodies, we push for women's engagement to be built into consultations, strategies, and decisions, not bolted on at the end.

Through cross-community and cross-sector networks, linking with health, business, civic, and voluntary organisations, we help create safe spaces for women to share learning, resources, and support.

**Because when women engage fully, our communities grow stronger, our policies grow fairer, and our society has the chance to thrive, not just survive.**





# WOMEN'STEC TRY A TRADE DAY WITH THE HOUSING EXECUTIVE: AIMING TO INSPIRE THE NEXT GENERATION OF CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

By Amy Nolan | WomensTec

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WOMEN'STEC are passionate about demonstrating to young people, and particularly young girls, that careers in construction and trades are not only open to them, but also exciting and rewarding opportunities. That is why our latest Try a Trade Event, in partnership with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, was so important!

This event brought together schools, industry professionals, and our team of amazing tutors, with a hands-on introduction to some of the different careers in construction that girls could avail of. Over two days, we worked with St. Gerards Special School and their post-16 students as well as girls from Belfast Model School for Girls and Blessed Trinity College.

This event was part of our #NotJustForBoys programme, which is aimed at challenging outdated stereotypes and encouraging girls to think about their futures differently. All too often, young women are directed away from practical careers in trades such as joinery, plumbing, electrics or painting and decorating. By creating an opportunity for girls to actively take part in these trades, they are able to understand that construction is not only accessible to them, but an exciting and rewarding career which allows them to use their skills in creativity, problem-solving and leadership.

During the event, students participated in a variety of useful workshops, from the basics of tiling and plumbing, to conversations about gender stereotypes and the types of careers open to them. Participants donned their safety gear, rolled up their sleeves, and started exploring skills they did not know they had. For many, it was the first time they had used a saw, drill or paintbrush in a workshop. The feedback from the girls when they completed their first wall at the bricklaying station was a brilliant affirmation as to why these experiences are so important.

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The Housing Executive has long since recognised the need to address skills deficits in construction and inspire greater diversity in our workforce. In partnership with WOMEN'STEC as a #NotJustForBoysChampion, they are helping us to raise awareness of that opportunities that exist for young women, while contributing to the industry's future potential.

**Claire King, Project Coordinator at WOMEN'STEC, commented:**

***"Our Try a Trade Days are an opportunity to break down barriers with our students. By allowing girls to experience the trades for themselves, in a safe, encouraging environment, we aim to open their minds about what careers in construction really entail, and show them they already have the skills they need to succeed in this industry. We want every participant to leave knowing that construction is #NotJustForBoys; it's a pathway to a rewarding, secure, and enjoyable career."***

The feedback from students and teachers was incredibly positive. Many girls said they had never considered a career in the trades before, but they were now considering pursuing apprenticeships or further training. The teachers commented on how valuable learning out of a classroom and physically learning was, especially with our tutors as role models.

The #NotJustForBoys programme is continuing to have a positive reach hundreds of girls in Northern Ireland. By mixing outreach, events, and partnerships with schools and industry organisations, the programme inspires and identifies pathways into careers that might otherwise seem unreachable. We are exciting to be partnering again with the Housing Executive for two more Try A Trades days across Northern Ireland in Coleraine and Newry.

***Emma Smith-Guy, Artes Manager at the Housing Executive, shared the significance of this joint initiative:***

***“We’re delighted to be partnering with WOMEN’STEC to run another Try A Trade event. We’ve allowed students to come and experience a hands-on approach to tiling, bricklaying, plumbing and car mechanics. It’s so important to partner on programs like this and to give everyone a fair experience. Construction is nearly 100% male dominated, so we want to give this experience to those who are underrepresented, such as the SEN students and girls. We can’t wait to partner in future projects again!”***

Events like this aren't just a one-off—they are part of the #NotJustForBoys movement to challenge stereotypes and perceptions and develop a workforce for the future that is inclusive, capable and confident. WOMEN’STEC will continue to advocate for opportunities for women and girls and partnerships, and working with organisations like the Housing Executive are key to this work. Together, we are making sure that the next generation understands that construction is #NotJustForBoys!

If you'd like to learn more about our #NotJustForBoys project or our work with #NotJustForBoysChampions, you can visit [www.womenstec.org](http://www.womenstec.org) or contact Amy Nolan, Communications Officer by emailing [Amy.Nolan@womenstec.org](mailto:Amy.Nolan@womenstec.org).





## ENGAGING FOR EQUALITY: NIWBG'S WORK ON GENDER BUDGETING AT POLITICAL PARTY CONFERENCES

By Alex Brennan | NI Women's Budget Group

The previous weekend, the NIWBG shared a stall with Women'sTEC at the DUP party conference. We engaged with members of the party, councillors, MLAs, and MPs throughout the day, catching up with representatives we have engaged with in the past as well as introducing ourselves to representatives who have not come across our work. The main policy area we touched upon related to our work on gender budgeting, particularly our project with Ulster University. We brought the four working papers from the project, including the case study which highlighted stark gender imbalances with the area of apprenticeships and HLAs. We also provided pamphlets on gender budgeting and information on the NIWBG.

Besides gender budgeting, other policy areas that were discussed were around the gender pay gap, the gendered nature of the care sector, and budgeting transparency. The conference was also a good opportunity to engage with other stallholders/observers. With the DUP party conference being the first of the conference season, we are looking forward to attending the SDLP and UUP conferences in the upcoming weekends, as well as the Alliance conference and Sinn Féin Ard Fheis in the spring.



## **Case Study: Applying Gender Budgeting to Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland (Adapted from Gender Budgeting: Working Paper 2 Case Study: Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland)**

### **Background**

Apprenticeships have long been a cornerstone of vocational education policy in Northern Ireland (NI), offering pathways to employment, skills development, and economic mobility. However, a gender analysis of the ApprenticeshipsNI and Higher-Level Apprenticeships (HLA) programmes reveals persistent gender inequalities in participation, funding, and outcomes.

### **The Problem**

Despite policy commitments to widen participation and address occupational segregation, apprenticeship programmes in NI remain highly gendered:

- Men dominate participation in both ApprenticeshipsNI and HLAs, particularly in high-paying sectors like engineering and construction.
- Women are overrepresented in lower-paid sectors such as health and social care, often referred to as the "five Cs": cleaning, catering, cashiering, clerical, and caring.
- Public funding disproportionately benefits men, as they are clustered in more resource-intensive programmes.
- Young women (16–19) are significantly underrepresented, limiting early career opportunities and reinforcing long-term labour market disadvantage.

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### **The Role of Gender Budgeting**

**Gender Budgeting is a tool that integrates a gender perspective into all stages of the budget cycle to promote equality. Applying this approach to NI's apprenticeship strategy would:**

- 1.Expose gendered spending patterns – revealing how current funding structures favour male-dominated sectors.**
  - 2.Redirect resources to address structural inequalities – for example, by investing in training and career progression in the social care sector, which is predominantly female.**
  - 3.Support targeted interventions – such as women-only training in non-traditional sectors, gender-sensitive career guidance, and employer incentives with a gender premium.**
  - 4.Ensure accountability – through the development of SMART targets and performance indicators to reduce occupational segregation and monitor gender-disaggregated outcomes.**
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## Impact Potential

A gender budgeting approach could transform apprenticeships into a more equitable policy tool by:

- Improving access and outcomes for women, especially young women and those in undervalued sectors.
- Reducing the gender pay gap by enabling women to enter higher-paid, male-dominated industries.
- Enhancing economic resilience by recognising and investing in the care economy as a growth sector.
- Fulfilling legal obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to promote equality of opportunity.

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**Gender Budgeting offers a strategic and evidence-based method to reform apprenticeship policy in Northern Ireland. By aligning public expenditure with equality goals, it can help dismantle entrenched gender disparities and ensure that apprenticeships deliver fair and inclusive economic opportunities for all.**

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**WRC is funded by the RISP programme**

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