

# Women's Regional Consortium



Women's Regional  
**Consortium**

**Annual  
Report  
2025-6**



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## 1. Our Key Areas of Work

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 five key areas;

- **Advocacy and Leadership**
- **Policy**
- **Research**
- **Service Support**
- **Engagement**



**Lead Partner**

## 2. Lead Partner Report

### **Norma Shearer MBE**

Chief Executive, Training for Women  
Network  
Lead Partner, Women's Regional  
Consortium



*“Women’s voices, lived experiences, and expertise remain central to decision-making.”*

As I reflect on the past year, this statement captures the heart of the work carried out by the Women’s Regional Consortium and our partner organisations across Northern Ireland. Throughout 2025–2026, the Consortium continues to ensure that women from disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities are not only supported, but heard, valued, and empowered to influence the decisions that affect their lives.

This report highlights a year of significant achievement, collaboration, and impact. During a time of continued economic uncertainty, rising poverty, pressures on mental health and wellbeing, and increasing concern around violence against women and girls, the Consortium has remained a trusted voice and support for women across our communities.

One of the strongest themes throughout this year’s work has been the importance of lived experience. Through engagement on issues such as poverty, childcare, economic inactivity, unpaid care, and women’s health, women shared openly and courageously about the realities they face every day. These voices have shaped consultations, informed research, strengthened advocacy, and influenced policy discussions at every level.

This year also demonstrated the power of collective action. The decision to scrap the two-child limit marked an important milestone following years of sustained campaigning and advocacy across the women’s and community sectors. Women from rural, urban communities also stepped confidently into leadership spaces – engaging with Ministers, contributing

to consultations, participating in parliamentary events, and ensuring their experiences were represented where decisions are made.

Research continued to play a vital role in strengthening the evidence for change. Important work throughout the year explored women's mental health, violence against women and girls, health inequalities, barriers to employment, gender equality, and community wellbeing. Alongside this strategic work, thousands of women and children accessed practical support through wellbeing programmes, education and employability initiatives, leadership development, peer support, health awareness sessions, and community engagement activities delivered across the Consortium partnership.

Behind every piece of work outlined within this report is the dedication of staff, volunteers, facilitators, researchers, community leaders, and most importantly, the women who continue to shape and guide our work through their resilience, insight, and determination.

I would like to sincerely thank everyone who has contributed to the work of the Women's Regional Consortium throughout the past year. Together, we remain committed to building a more equal, inclusive, and compassionate society where women's voices continue to shape the future of our communities.

## **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 (NIRWN)**
- **Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)**
- **Women's Support Network (WSN)**
- **Women'sTec**
- **Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)**
- **Women's Centre Derry (WCD)**

### 3. Advocacy and Leadership

The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas. In this capacity we advocate for the changes women want, represent women on various fora, and provide leadership to the sector.

#### **Campaigns**

##### ***Cliff Edge***

The Consortium is part of the Cliff Edge Coalition which is working to protect and strengthen the welfare mitigations package for Northern Ireland. The mitigations provide important protections for people on the Bedroom Tax and Benefit Cap. As a member of the Cliff Edge Working Group, Women's Support Network's Policy Worker, Siobhán Harding has undertaken a range of activities in the last year to support the work of the Coalition. Most of this work during the year has focused on the campaign to scrap the two-child limit in Universal Credit. In November 2025, Siobhán attended a campaign event at Stormont pushing for the scrapping of the two-child limit ahead of the Autumn Budget. In January 2026, Siobhán spoke to the Communities Committee about the importance of the announcement to scrap the two-child limit including case study evidence gathered during Consortium engagement work with women.



*Figure 1: Siobhán Harding speaking to the Communities Committee about the impact of the two-child limit, January 2026*

The scraping of the two-child limit has been a very important policy win and will make a significant difference to the lives of the children and families who are impacted by it. Finally getting rid of this policy is the result of years of campaigning and representation work by the women's sector, the Community and Voluntary sector and the Cliff Edge Coalition.

### ***Where's Our Democracy?***



*Figure 2: The speakers panel from WRDA's Two Years on Where's Our Democracy launch.*

In February 2024, when the Assembly returned, the Women's Policy Group produced 15 high-priority requests referred to as the "Day 1 Asks". These were followed up with more detailed briefings, personalised to each Department and sent to each Minister along with a request to meet. Two years on, in March 2026 the WPG have assessed progress against the Day 1 Asks and against the priorities

identified in the Briefings. The progress report also assesses whether Ministers or their staff have met with the sector to hear our concerns and

answer our questions in person. You can find the full report on WRDA's website.

### ***Challenging the Far-Right Weaponisation of Ending Violence Against Women and Girls***

In light of the far-right tactic of exploiting incidents of violence against women and girls to promote hate and misinformation WRDA produced a guide for politicians and Third Sector leaders. This guide addresses the troubling trend of far-right groups weaponising the campaign to end violence against women and girls (VAWG) to promote xenophobic, racist, and Islamophobic narratives. It provides practical messaging strategies for politicians, public bodies, and third sector leaders to counter this misuse, emphasising the importance of framing VAWG as a systemic, homegrown issue rather than one linked to migration. The guide urges leaders to focus on shared community values, avoid amplifying harmful rhetoric, and promote inclusive, fact-based discourse. It highlights that VAWG has long existed in Northern Ireland, predating immigration trends, and calls for collective action to support affected communities and challenge divisive narratives.

The guide has been disseminated widely and has been endorsed by the Assembly All Party Group on Women, Peace and Security.

### ***Shift the Shame***



*Figure 3: WRDA Trustee Catherine Minford and WRDA Director Anne McVicker speaking at the launch of Shift the Shame*

In April 2025, WRDA launched Shift the Shame, a powerful campaign aimed at exposing and disrupting the link between violence against women and homelessness in Northern Ireland. This initiative, funded by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI), seeks to reframe the narrative, shifting the shame from victims to perpetrators, and to drive systemic change across public services.

The campaign received support from Fourum through WRDA Management Committee Member, Catherine Minford. The launch was held in Fourum's Belfast

office and coincided with the release of a major report commissioned by CFNI and conducted by Heriot Watt University. The report, *Violence Against Women and Homelessness*, led by researcher Lynne McMordie, revealed the stark failures of current support systems to protect women at their most vulnerable. It highlighted how these systems can, in some cases, exacerbate the trauma experienced by women fleeing violence. Shift the Shame was also informed by research commissioned by WRDA, *The Connection between Domestic Violence and Homelessness In NI*. This report is available on WRDA's website.

The campaign calls for urgent, coordinated action across housing, justice, health, and education sectors.

### ***Meetings with Politicians***

In September 2025, Siobhán Harding, Policy Worker for Consortium partner, Women's Support Network, and staff from Atlas Women's Centre met with Education Minister Paul Givan to discuss the issues around childcare and poverty. Siobhán raised Consortium research on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy and Barriers to Work research which showed the impacts on women and children's education of poverty and the supports needed around both childcare and poverty to enable women and children to access education and opportunities.

In November 2025, together with other Community and Voluntary sector representatives Siobhán Harding met with Sinn Fein MLAS Colm Gildernew, Cathy Mason and Maolíosa McHugh to discuss an Assembly Motion on the Impact of the Ongoing Increase in the Cost of Living. Siobhán raised examples from Consortium research on the Impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on Women and from specific work with women on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy giving examples of the changes women felt were needed to help address the poverty they face.

In February 2026, alongside Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick from Ulster University, Siobhán met with Michelle Guy MLA and officials from the Alliance Party to discuss concerns about the draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.

In March 2026, on behalf of the Consortium, Siobhán along with other members of the Women’s Policy Group met with Cathy Mason MLA, Danny Baker MLA and officials from Sinn Fein to discuss issues with the draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy and Holiday Hunger payments. At this meeting concerns were raised about a lack of focus on the Women’s Centre Childcare Fund and concerns over childcare for disadvantaged children arising from the proposals in the draft. Siobhán also raised Consortium research on the Impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on Women which recommended the urgent reinstatement of the Holiday Hunger Scheme in Northern Ireland.

### ***Engagement with the Prime Minister and President***



*Figure 4: NIRWN Director Louise Coyle at 10 Downing Street*

As guests of the Irish Secretariat, Laurence Simms, NIRWN had the opportunity to meet with Catherine Connolly TD, the new Uachtarán na hÉireann (President of Ireland), during her inaugural visit to our region. We took the opportunity to explore together our shared respect for rural women and their impact on shaping this island. We reflected on how far we have come in the last 25 years, the vital work of peace-building and cross border relationships and the challenges and

opportunities ahead as we continue to shape a better future for rural women. NIRWN also met with the Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer MP, at Downing Street to celebrate what is special about our region and recognise the contribution made by rural women to the social, economic, cultural and political fabric of NI. NIRWN Director Louise Coyle used the opportunity to have a detailed conversation with Secretary of State for NI, Sir Hilary Benn MP, about the proposed changes from UKSPF to Local Growth Fund. Potential options were discussed with follow up actions agreed.

### ***Opposition Day Debate on the Anti-Poverty Strategy***

As part of the Cliff Edge Coalition Working Group, Siobhán worked on a briefing paper detailing the problems with the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy and this was submitted to the SDLP ahead of the Opposition Day Debate in October 2025. The briefing welcomed the commitment to continuing to deliver the existing mitigations on the Bedroom Tax and the Benefit Cap and raised concern that there were no commitments to strengthen the welfare mitigations package further. Alongside colleagues from the Community and Voluntary sector, Siobhán attended a meeting with the SDLP prior to the debate to highlight Consortium research on the impact of poverty on women, children and families.

### ***Discussing research on the Anti-Poverty Strategy with the Communities Committee***

In November 2025, Siobhán presented joint research with the NI Anti-Poverty Network, Ulster University and Save the Children NI on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy engagement with women to the Communities Committee. Siobhán highlighted the need for this engagement work on the ground to ensure that women knew about the draft Strategy and were facilitated to respond to it. Siobhán also raised the importance of ensuring that those with lived experience were central to the development of the Anti-Poverty Strategy. Rachel Benson from Atlas Women's Centre who took part in a Consortium engagement event on the Strategy also spoke to the Committee about her own experiences and what she felt needed to be included in the Strategy to help her and women like her to address the poverty they face.

### ***Independent Review of the Withdrawal Agreement***

NIRWN's Executive Director, Louise Coyle alongside sector colleagues met with Lord Paul Murphy who is leading an independent review of the Withdrawal Agreement and its effectiveness. Sense checking with Civil Society and creating the mechanisms with which to do so is critical if we are to thrive post EU Exit. Our contribution is identified in the final Report under Annex B

A large part of the advocacy work of NIRWN is ensuring rural women are provided with access and opportunities to advocate for themselves. NIRWN supported our members to attend and make representation in the

NI Assembly Chambers at the Women's Parliament held at Parliament Buildings, Stormont Estate. NIRWN members Edel Gribbin, Denise Kelso and Barbara Campbell had the opportunity to speak on issues affecting rural women in their areas. The members provided powerful testimony and advocacy on behalf of all rural women in our region. We also had members in attendance who provided support and solidarity to those speaking.

We would like to thank the women who participated and to those who attended in support of them, the NI Assembly Team who worked hard for weeks to ensure women felt prepared and were well taken care of, the MLAs who participated in roundtable discussions over lunch, and to DAERA Minister Andrew Muir MLA who specifically made time to meet our members and listen to them. The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Andrew Muir MLA, the Minister of Health, Mike Nesbitt MLA and Junior Ministers, Aisling Reilly MLA and Pam Cameron MLA were also present to respond to the motion.

### ***Leadership at Four Nations Level***

The NIWBG has continued to play a leadership role in advocacy across Northern Ireland, the UK, and internationally. Through its 4 Nations work, NIWBG's funding for the 3 Nations project from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation was renewed, enabling continued relationship-building and cross-working at a 3- and 4-nations level. In spring 2025, NIWBG held its annual WBG Assembly online, with a specific focus on 4-nations perspectives on women's and children's poverty and the interlinkages between them. In autumn 2025, NIWBG led a virtual event providing a 4-nations analysis of the Chancellor's Autumn Budget Statement.

The four Women's Budget Groups met twice over the financial year. In August, a strategic session was held in Wales to discuss group focuses, policy contexts, and funding situations. This meeting led to a successful application to the Connect Fund, supporting a WBG Summit in London in February. The Summit focused on developing a five-year strategy for the 4 Nations project, including policy and advocacy direction, ways of working, sustainability, and funding.

NIWBG also strengthened its leadership profile through speaking engagements and media work. Staff spoke at the cross-sectoral Anti-Poverty Conference in September 2025, represented a Northern Ireland perspective at the 'Recipes for Gender Equality' childcare conference in Dublin in November 2025, and participated in a childcare event at Stormont through the Childcare for All Campaign. NIWBG also spoke on BBC Talkback in January 2026 about gender budgeting and the need for improved budgeting processes.

Internationally, NIWBG became a core group member of the European Gender Budgeting Network and attended the EGBN conference in Cyprus in March, further strengthening international leadership and learning links.

### ***Advocating for women in the Northwest***

In 2025/26, Women Centre Derry played a key role within the Women's Regional Consortium, ensuring that the voices and lived experiences of women in disadvantaged communities informed local and regional decision-making.

We contributed to a range of strategic forums and partnerships, including the Community of Practice Forum, where we actively advocated for the needs of ethnic minority women, including refugee and asylum-seeking women, ensuring their experiences are reflected in service planning and delivery.

Women Centre Derry also sits on the Better Start in Life Steering Group and the Child Rights and Participation Board, working alongside community and statutory partners to influence early years provision and family support services, and to identify gaps at a community level.

A key priority in 2025/26 was strengthening our work around women's safety and ending violence against women and girls (VAWG). We demonstrated leadership in this area by hosting our 'Under One Roof' event, bringing together over 30 organisations to improve collaboration, coordination, and access to support for women experiencing violence and abuse.

## ***Strengthening Feminist Infrastructure***

WRDA plays a central leadership role within the women's sector in Northern Ireland, working regionally and cross-border to advance women's equality and participation in public life. The organisation provides informed, values-driven leadership that amplifies women's voices, strengthens feminist infrastructure, and builds solidarity across communities, particularly in the context of growing social inequality, violence against women and girls, and the rise of far-right rhetoric.

A core element of this leadership is WRDA's extensive representation across statutory, civic, and voluntary forums. Staff contribute expertise to a wide range of bodies including the Women's Policy Group, Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group, All-Party Groups at the Assembly, Women's Parliament, UNSCR 1325 networks, and international women's peacebuilding initiatives. Through this representation, WRDA ensures that women's lived experiences—particularly those of marginalised women—are brought directly into decision-making spaces.

WRDA also leads high-profile advocacy campaigns that influence public discourse and challenge harmful narratives. The Raise Your Voice programme has continued to deliver large-scale engagement across Northern Ireland, reaching communities, workplaces, public bodies, and young people with evidence-based education on violence against women and girls. Evaluations consistently show high levels of satisfaction and increased confidence among participants to challenge inappropriate behaviour and support cultural change.



*Figure 5: Megan McClure Botha, Sarah Stack, Anne McVicker, and Elaine Crory at the launch of Shift the Shame*

In 2025, WRDA demonstrated strategic campaign leadership through Shift the Shame, a landmark initiative addressing the connection between violence against women and homelessness. The campaign reframed public narratives by centring survivor voices and highlighting systemic failures across housing, justice, and health services. By combining survivor testimony, commissioned research, and public engagement, Shift the Shame positioned WRDA as a leading voice on intersectional responses to violence and housing insecurity.

Through Women’s Spaces, WRDA also provides leadership within peace-building and civic engagement work. As part of a four-partner consortium, the Agency supported women’s participation in political, peace, and civic life, delivering high-quality events, workshops, and policy engagement with strong evidence of increased knowledge, confidence, and motivation to engage in public decision-making.

## 4. Policy

The Consortium ensures that there is a continuous two-way flow of information between government and the sector. We ensure that organisations, centres, and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. We also provide a route for women to participate in this process.

The work of the Consortium aims to connect grassroots women with decision makers and ensure the views of women are taken into account when decisions are being made that impact on women's lives. The volume of consultations from the NI Assembly continues to remain high and some of these consultations have been on important areas of policy work including the draft Anti-Poverty and Early Learning and Childcare Strategies. WSN submitted 16 responses to consultations from both the NI Assembly and from Westminster Government across a range of issues as follows:

- **Supplementary Consultation on Domestic Rating Measures (Department of Finance)** – the Consortium response called for the maximum capital value to be removed and to include protections for those who own their own home, but whose income is limited to their pension, social security benefits or income from low-paid work. It also called for the early payment discount to be removed as it is unfair to provide a discount to those households who are more likely to be able to afford these payments.
- **Department of Health Draft Budget 2025–26 EQIA** – the Consortium's letter response to this consultation raised several concerns with proposals to restrict domiciliary care packages, reductions in staffing and hospital beds and in waiting list activity which will all have greater impacts for women.
- **Consultation on Proposals to amend the Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care for Children Under Age 12 (Department of Health)** – the Consortium response highlighted the rigid nature of the options outlined in the consultation and advocated for a degree of flexibility in childminding settings. The response also raised concerns that the consultation does not address the needs of

children looked after in mainstream childcare facilities that need additional support.

- **Addressing Age Discrimination in Goods, Facilities and Services (Claire Sugden, Private Members Bill)** – the Consortium’s response fully supported the proposals as Northern Ireland is the only region in the UK or Ireland not to have this protection. These proposals would make it unlawful to treat someone unfairly because of their age when accessing services like financial products, transport, insurance or healthcare.
- **Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to get Britain Working Green Paper (Department for Work & Pensions)** – the Consortium response raised strenuous opposition to the proposals in the Green Paper. The response focused on the likelihood of these proposals having greater impact in Northern Ireland as it has traditionally had a much higher proportion of people claiming disability benefits and raised the gendered impacts around increased likelihood to claim social security and to provide unpaid care.
- **Department for Communities Budget 2025–26 allocations** – the Consortium made a significant response to this consultation as one of the Departments which is most closely aligned to the work of the Consortium through its work with women in disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland. The response raised concerns about proposals for budget cuts which would impact on those on the lowest incomes many of whom will be women and stated that the gendered impacts were not sufficiently addressed within the consultation.
- **Consultation on NI Executive Anti-Poverty Strategy** – the Consortium provided a substantial response to this consultation raising concerns about the lack of new actions contained in the draft plan to address rising poverty levels. Serious concerns were also raised about the lack of lived experience included in the draft Strategy and from the proposed commitments. The Consortium called for measurable and timebound targets and outcomes, ringfenced funding and the critical need to engage with people experiencing poverty. This followed extensive engagement with women on the content of the draft Strategy.

- **Breastfeeding Bill (Linda Dillon, Private Members Bill)** – the Consortium’s letter response welcomed this Bill but urged for more actions in relation to improving attitudes, providing practical support for new mothers and addressing wider inequalities and safety concerns in order to strengthen the Bill and positively impact breastfeeding rates in Northern Ireland.
- **Disability and Work: A Strategy for Northern Ireland (Department for Communities)** – the Consortium’s letter response stressed the need for the Strategy to be Executive wide, to have the necessary funding to achieve its aims and to provide genuine personalised support. It also highlighted the gendered issues around disability and work including evidence from the Consortium’s research on Women and Barriers to Work.
- **NI Census User Needs Consultation (NISRA)** – the Consortium’s letter response highlighted that in general Government departments are not producing sufficient disaggregated data for our needs. It also called for additional questions to be included in the Census around unpaid carers which allows the separation of data on the provision of childcare from unpaid care.
- **Proposal for a Bill on the Right to Wear Trousers to School (Committee for Education)** – the Consortium response strongly advocated for the right for girls to wear trousers in school on the grounds of equality, choice, comfort and affordability.
- **Department of Finance consultation on a Draft Budget 2026-2029/30** – the Consortium’s letter response welcomed the move to multi-year budgeting but highlighted concerns about the overall lack of funding and a range of adverse impacts identified in the Equality Assessment which accompanied the draft budget.
- **Northern Ireland Executive Disability Strategy 2025-2035** – the Consortium’s letter response raised concerns about the Strategy particularly on the lack of focus on the disproportionate rates of poverty for deaf and disabled people. It called for clear targets, the necessary funding and proper co-production.
- **Realising potential: Delivering the Child Poverty Strategy (Westminster Inquiry by the Education and Work & Pensions Committees)** – the Consortium’s response detailed the situation in relation to Child Poverty in Northern Ireland and raised concerns

about the lack of action in NI in relation to policies which might have an impact including access to Free School Meals.

- **Early Learning and Childcare Strategy (NI Executive)** – the Consortium submitted a detailed response to this consultation highlighting the importance of community-based childcare provision to effectively tackle disadvantage such as the Women’s Centre Childcare Fund. It also raised concerns about a lack of detail on some of the actions and on funding to carry out the actions.
- **Consultation on notice to quit periods (Department for Communities)** – the Consortium’s letter response

WRDA and the Women’s Policy Group submitted 36 responses to consultations and calls for evidence during the year as follows:

- WRDA Response to the Department for Communities consultation on Notice to Quit Periods – March 2026
- WPG NI Response to the Department of Education’s Draft Early Learning & Childcare Strategy – March 2026
- WRDA Response to Northern Ireland Executive’s Disability Strategy 2025–2035 consultation – March 2026
- Women’s Policy Group NI Response to the Draft Budget 2026–2029/30 Consultation – March 2026
- WPG NI Response to Bill on the right to choose to wear trousers in school – February 2026
- WRDA Response to NISRA consultation on Census User Needs – February 2026
- WRDA Response to the Draft Disability & Work Strategy – January 2026
- WRDA Response to PHA Partnership and Engagement Strategy Consultation – December 2025
- WRDA Response to DAERA’s Consultation on Northern Ireland’s Fourth Carbon Budget – December 2025
- WRDA Response to DAERA’s Consultation on Northern Ireland’s Fourth Carbon Budget – November 2025
- WPG NI Response to Breastfeeding Bill – October 2025

- WPG NI Response to Women and Girls in Sport in Northern Ireland October 2025
- WPG NI Response to Private Cemetery Status (Burial Protection) Bill - October 2025
- WPG NI Response to Proposals to Criminalise Sexually Explicit Deepfakes Images - October 2025
- WPG NI Submission to the Committee for the Executive Office on the Inquiry (Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses) and Redress Scheme Bill - September 2025
- WRDA Response to DoF Consultation on Reform of Divorce and Dissolution of Civil Partnership Legislation - September 2025
- WPG NI Response to Anti-Poverty Strategy Consultation - September 2025
- WPG NI Response to For Women Scotland v Scottish Ministers and its implications for NI consultation - September 2025
- WPG NI Response to the Draft Transport Strategy 2035 - September 2025
- WPG NI Response to Victims of Sexual Crimes Trauma Mitigation Bill - September 2025
- Women's Policy Group NI's response to the Department for Communities Draft Budget EQIA (2025-26) - August 2025
- Women's Policy Group Response to the Draft Third Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme - July 2025
- Women's Policy Group NI's response to the Draft Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy 2025-2030 - July 2025
- WRDA Response to the DoJ Consultation on Reduced Sentences for Guilty Pleas - July 2025
- WPG NI Response to the Department of Education's Budget EQIA - July 2025
- WPG NI Response to Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working - June 2025
- WPG NI Response to Proposal to Amend the Minimum Standards for Childminding Day Care for Children under Age 12 - June 2025

- WPG NI Response to Consultation on Addressing Age Discrimination in Goods, Facilities and Services - June 2025
- WRDA Response to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee questionnaire on Violence Against Women & Girls in Northern Ireland - June 2025
- WPG NI Response to Dfi Budget EQIA 2025-26 - June 2025
- WPG NI Evidence Submission to the International Development Committee Inquiry on Women, Peace and Security - May 2025
- WPG NI Response to the Ban on Unfair Letting Fees Consultation - May 2025
- WPG NI Response to the Social Value Bill Consultation April 2025
- WPG NI Response to Supplementary Consultation on Domestic Rating Measures - April 2025
- WPG NI Response to Department of Health Draft Budget 2025-26 EQIA April 2025

NIWBG responded to a wide range of consultations. In 2025, this included departmental Budget EQIAs (DoH, Dfi, DE, and DfC), the Department of Finance's Supplementary Consultation on Domestic Rating Measures, the Department for Work and Pensions' Consultation on Pathways to Work, DfC's Consultation on the Anti-Poverty Strategy, and a Private Members' Bill on Women and Girls in Sport in Northern Ireland. In 2026, NIWBG submitted responses to the Department of Finance's Draft Budget 2026-29/30 Consultation and the Department of Education's Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.

A policy priority for NIRWN this year has been to support the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs with the intensive co-design process and development of the NI Executive's New Approach. NIRWN's Executive Director Louise Coyle, co-chaired one of the three co design subgroups and represented rural women on the oversight Committee. Let's Talk Rural! Rural NI: Our New Approach (2026-2041) is now open for public consultation. The draft policy was developed with a wide range of stakeholders through an intensive co-design process.

Throughout the financial year, NIWBG engaged extensively with policy processes and political stakeholders. NIWBG undertook sustained political engagement, attending the DUP, UUP, and SDLP party conferences in September/October 2025 and the Alliance Party conference in March 2026. These engagements directly contributed to subsequent briefings and an information session with the NI Assembly Women's Caucus. Plans are in place to attend the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis in April. Follow-up policy discussions were held with the UUP, SDLP, and Sinn Féin on the gender budgeting motion passed in the Assembly, supporting cross-party understanding of gender budgeting principles.

In 2025/26, Women Centre Derry made a significant contribution to the Consortium's responses to a range of policy consultations.

Our input was grounded in direct engagement with women accessing our services, ensuring that policy responses were shaped by lived experience. We highlighted key issues including economic inactivity, access to affordable childcare, mental health, and the ongoing impact of cost-of-living pressures.

We also provided evidence relating to violence against women and girls, advocating for trauma-informed, joined-up approaches and improved access to appropriate support services. Through our cross-border and regional work, we ensured that the additional barriers faced by women in rural and border areas were clearly articulated and considered.

## 5. Research

### ***A Changed Society-The Future of Gender Equality in NI***

NIRWN launched their Research Report on 31 October marking the 25th anniversary of the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which laid the foundation for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. This resolution was a major milestone: it recognized that peace and security cannot be achieved without considering the perspectives and needs of women and girls. As a region still emerging from conflict, women are still underrepresented in every decision-making space. Reports from victims' services, politicians, and researchers consistently highlight Northern Ireland as one of the most dangerous places in Europe for women, particularly in the context of domestic violence and femicide; a fact not unconnected to our conflict we need to address Gender Equality and how we embed it into the fabric of our society through policy making and cultural change. Exasperated at the painfully slow pace of change and the non-implementation of UN Security Resolution 1325 in NI; we decided to look beyond our borders to find what could be learned from others who are doing it better.

Iceland have remained number one in the world on gender equality, yet this was not always the case. As a low population, historically patriarchal island on the edge of Europe we wondered: 'How did they create change and how do they build and maintain gender equality?'. Our staff members; Louise Coyle and Charmain Jones spent six days in Iceland on a study visit in an effort to find out more and how it could translate in Northern Ireland. This report includes our findings and recommendations for NI. If we are serious about lasting peace in this region then the evidence is clear; it will require an intentional plan to embed gender equality at all levels of society and decision making. NIRWN has delivered several workshops to disseminate the findings including at Ulster University.

### **NEW RESEARCH UNDERWAY – Mental Health Matters for Women**

**During Winter 2025, Siobhán completed a series of focus groups for the next Consortium research paper ‘Mental Health Matters for Women’ which will be published in 2026. The focus groups involved 67 women in total from across Northern Ireland.**

The aim of the research is to highlight a number of areas:

- The problems with poor mental health in Northern Ireland.
- Women’s increased likelihood to experience poor mental health.
- The contributing factors to poor mental health and the impact of poor mental health on women’s lives.
- What supports women are currently receiving with their mental health including from their local Women’s Centre and what further supports they feel are needed.
- To highlight the role of Women’s Centres and women’s organisations in helping women with poor mental health to live better lives and take the opportunities open to them.

This research paper will add to the bank of research carried out on behalf of the Consortium over the last number of years. Siobhán continues to use the results of this research in wider advocacy, lobbying, media and policy work.

***NIWBG’s research activity focused on tax justice and gender budgeting.***

Through the Tax Project, NIWBG secured funding to promote understanding of tax, particularly wealth taxes. During the year, NIWBG engaged tax experts and hosted a presentation from Tax Justice UK at the September 2025 quarterly members’ meeting. NIWBG commissioned research to produce an accessible pamphlet explaining what tax is, the gendered impacts of un-progressive tax systems, and how a wealth tax could benefit women in Northern Ireland. This resource is intended to support engagement with women across Northern Ireland.

Under the JRCT-funded gender budgeting project with Ulster University, researchers compiled and analysed leisure, equality, and financial data provided by Derry City and Strabane District Council. The resulting gender data analysis has been shared with the Council, with plans underway to present findings to the Senior Leadership Team. NIWBG also presented

progress from the pilot to the Council's Governance and Strategic Planning Committee in May, receiving widespread support from councillors. Recommendations will be provided to support the mainstreaming of gender data analysis and capacity-building within Council practices.

***In 2025/26, Women Centre Derry made a strong contribution to a number of significant research initiatives.***

We played an active role in the BORDER (BordEx) research project with Queen's University Belfast, ensuring that women's experiences and key issues were captured and represented. This included participation in stakeholder engagement events and delivering a presentation at the launch of the research.

As part of the Women's Regional Consortium, we worked in partnership with the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation on research into economic inactivity across four border areas, highlighting the structural and practical barriers faced by women in accessing employment.

We also contributed to the Transcending Borders project, working collaboratively with organisations across both sides of the border to identify gaps in service provision and strengthen cross-border linkages, particularly for women in rural and border communities.

Research is a central pillar of WRDA's work, underpinning its advocacy, policy influence, and programme design. The Agency uses feminist methodologies that prioritise lived experience, intersectionality, and participatory approaches, ensuring that research outputs are both credible and grounded in women's realities.

***Health Inequalities in Northern Ireland***

In October 2025, WRDA launched a major chapter of its Health Inequalities in Northern Ireland research, examining the urgent need for a comprehensive Women's Health Strategy. The research identified widespread barriers to care, including long waiting times, gaps in gynaecological and post-partum services, and the dismissal of women's health concerns. Drawing on focus groups with women from diverse backgrounds, the findings provided concrete recommendations, including

the development of Women’s Health Hubs and the adoption of a whole-life, intersectional approach to healthcare planning.



Figure 6: The Launch of WRDA’s Women’s Health Strategy Research

### **Strength and Solidarity: Climate and Civil Food Resilience**



Figure 7: Panel discussion at the launch of WRDA’s Climate and Food Resilience guide.

In March 2026, in collaboration with Reclaim the Agenda, WRDA published *Strength and Solidarity: Climate and Civil Food Resilience*. This report highlights the urgent need for the UK government and civil society to develop civil food resilience as part of the necessary preparation for climate change and an increasingly insecure world. The guide takes a hopeful, can-do approach by providing practical

steps for individuals and communities as well as emphasizing the disproportionate impact of climate change on marginalized groups and calls for a whole-of-society approach, supported by infrastructure, guidance, and government action. The document includes a resources

section, information on organisations to follow, and a list of empowering civic actions for food resilience.

### ***The Role of Firearms in Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland***

#### **The Role of Firearms in Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland**

“Because my father having access to a gun meant that it was more realistic that he could carry out his threats to kill. The very presence of the gun, regardless of whether he used it or not, was enough to have us walking on eggshells for fear of our life. I also worried that as he drank heavily, he may be more likely to cause us harm when waving a weapon about under the influence of alcohol.”

Participant quote



In March 2026 WRDA published a major new research report examining the role of firearms in domestic abuse in Northern Ireland, highlighting how legally and illegally held weapons exacerbate violence against women and girls (VAWG). Triggered by a survivor’s call and a tragic triple murder in 2025, the study surveyed 19 respondents and found that firearms were often used as threats, causing severe psychological harm and fear, with most weapons legally owned and obtained through lax

vetting processes. Key themes include inadequate screening for domestic abuse in licensing, lack of consultation with partners, persistent illegal firearms linked to paramilitarism, and the lasting trauma of living with an armed abuser. The report calls for urgent reforms to vetting procedures—such as interviewing partners, cross-referencing domestic abuse reports, and ongoing monitoring—alongside investment in survivor support and consideration of firearms in family court decisions, to prevent further harm and align Northern Ireland’s laws with stricter standards in Britain.

Across all research activity, WRDA prioritises dissemination through policy briefings, campaigns, events, digital toolkits, and partnership platforms, ensuring research actively shapes public debate and policymaking rather than sitting in isolation.

## 6. Service Support and Engagement

The Consortium has links with hundreds of organisations across Northern Ireland, including networks, women's groups and community organisations. Through our membership networks we provide support, signposting and guidance to aid the strategic development and delivery of services for women in disadvantaged and rural areas. We also promote the work and services of local women's organisations, centres and groups. When surveyed in February 2026 90% of Consortium members rated the services they receive from the WRC as excellent or good. This demonstrates the quality of work done by the Consortium partners. The Consortium aims to empower local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities. Engagement with individual women and organisations relating to their needs through our social media, information distribution, events, and individual outreach is a key aspect of achieving this aim.

### ***Engagement on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy***

The publication of a draft Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland provided the perfect example of the need for and importance of engagement with those with lived experience. Alongside colleagues from Ulster University, the NI Anti-Poverty Network and Save the Children NI, Siobhán produced a Toolkit to help women 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 women to respond with their views on the Strategy. This was followed by a series of focus group discussions with women 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.



*Figure 8: Focus group at Shankill Shared Women's Centre led by the Women's Regional Consortium on the Draft Anti-Poverty Strategy*

What was clear from these sessions is that without this engagement explaining the consultation in clear, simple terms many of the women would not have known about the consultation, understood what was in the draft or been able to respond. 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.



### ***Rising Against Poverty Conference***

In September 2025, alongside a team of Community and Voluntary sector representatives working against poverty, Siobhán attended the Rising Against Poverty Conference to put the focus on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy and what actions needed to be included in the final draft to make a real difference in the lives of people in Northern Ireland. Siobhán also provided input to a workshop at the Conference on Unpaid Carer Poverty and included details of Consortium research on Women, Unpaid Caring and Employment.

### ***Panel Discussion on the need for a Women's Health Strategy***

Siobhán took part in a panel discussion for the launch of WRDA research on "Health Inequalities in Northern Ireland: A Woman's Health Strategy for Northern Ireland". On this panel she raised feedback from Consortium research on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on women's mental and physical health as well as feedback from engagement on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy.

### ***NIPSA Health & Safety Conference***

In October 2025, Siobhán attended the NIPSA Health & Safety Conference to give a presentation on the Consortium's research on Barriers to Work for Women. This presentation focused on the health-related barriers to work particularly around mental health and the supports that women felt were needed to enable them to balance work with health conditions.

### ***Household Expenditure Tracker Event***

In October 2025, Siobhán took part in a panel discussion at the Consumer Council Household Expenditure Tracker: Three Years of Consumer Insights event. At this event Siobhán discussed how poverty and the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis was causing women to struggle to meet their most essential bills. Siobhán also highlighted the value of community led responses including the work of the Women's Centres in addressing women's poverty and the need to invest in these trusted spaces. She also stressed the need to invest in the social security system to protect people from poverty.

### ***Presentations to Ulster University Students***

In November 2025, Siobhán presented to Ulster University Masters Students from social policy, criminology, peace & conflict studies courses on Community Based Research. Siobhán discussed with the students how she carries out Consortium research and detailed the findings of a number of recent Consortium research reports.

In December 2025, Siobhán presented to Ulster University students in the Gender and Human Rights module on Consortium research on Women, Unpaid Care and Employment detailing the impacts of caring on women including the health and financial impacts as well as how it affects their ability to work, to work at the level they want to work at and for the number of hours they want to work.

### ***Brown Envelope Research***

In December 2025, in partnership with Ulster University and Sheffield University, Siobhán held a focus group discussion to explore how women feel about 'brown envelope' communications including letters/messages from the Department for Communities, bills, etc. There was a good discussion about the issues around Government communications particularly on the issue of communications on Universal Credit.

### ***Sharing Consortium research with the Prime Minister***

In March 2026, Siobhán attended Atlas Women's Centre in Lisburn to meet the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Hilary Benn and the Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer. The visit was held to discuss Cost of Living pressures in Northern Ireland. At this event, Siobhán shared the results of Consortium research on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on Women. She also shared concerns that Northern Ireland was behind other countries in terms of further help which is needed to address the rising cost of living including help with Free School Meals.

Rural women have received a variety of bespoke support provided by NIRWN membership from confidence building, digital skills and women's health

### ***Digital Inclusion***

Two of NIRWN member groups came together for a practical IT Skills session, covering phone security, phone storage, the phone wallet, managing photos, online banking, and a look at the pros and cons of AI. Great energy and craic across both sessions

### ***'Visible, Vocal, Valued'***

NIRWN delivered a bespoke workshop called 'Visible, Vocal and Valued'. This workshop focused on encouraging women to find and use their voices confidently as well as providing tools for empowerment and self-reflection.

### ***World Mental Health Day 2025***

NIRWN members marked World Mental Health Day with a 'Feel Good Friday' event hosted by NIRWN; enjoying a calming and relaxing experience focussed on meditation and mindful therapies to celebrate World Mental Health Day 2025. With expert facilitation they were supported to take time to slow down, reconnect with themselves and they left feeling more grounded, recharged and uplifted with some tools to support their mental health.

### ***Equality, Diversity & Inclusion***



NIRWN employ a variety of approaches to promote inclusion and diversity across our member groups, and one methodology is through culture and the arts.

NIRWN was delighted to join Omagh Pride to mark and celebrate **#CultureNight2025** at the Strule Arts Centre, Omagh.

The evening began with a powerful presentation on the history of quilt making, followed by a panel discussion on how quilts help us navigate difficult conversations.

We then came together around the table to stitch our own shared quilt of resistance and reflection.

So many added their voice, creativity, and care to make this such a special gathering.

### ***Group Support***

As part of our Engagement NIRWN has a programme of dedicated one to one catch ups with our member Groups. Our Engagement Officer had a lovely catch up with Eileen Drumm from the Women Making Waves group in Fermanagh.

Women Making Waves is a disabled and non-disabled Women's group and is one of our member groups. Eileen is also a former Trustee of NIRWN.

A week of engagements across NIRWN member Groups in Newry, Mourne and Down to discuss the opportunity of a full year of bespoke, tailored support to enhance and future proof their delivery for generations to come of rural women in their area.

### ***International Day of Rural Women 2025***

NIRWN marked International Day of Rural Women on Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> October at Lough Neagh Discovery Centre with over 100 of our members in attendance. We had vital conversations on our climate and environment at our 'Seeds of Change' event. This conference event provided opportunities for rural women to receive information and advice from other providers and to network with one another. Members had the opportunity to hear from and engage directly with the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Andrew Muir MLA.

NIRWN work every day to ensure that rural women are #Visible #Influential and #Valued

We would like to acknowledge the Minister and his staff team for their efforts championing and ensuring rural women are part of all the conversations year-round, not just on International Day of Rural Women.

### ***Information Events***

NIRWN participated in and held several information events across the year to promote opportunities for rural and disadvantaged women.

NIWBG delivered a broad programme of **training, engagement, and capacity-building** over the year.

Within the JRCT gender budgeting project, NIWBG supported councils, officials, and stakeholders through:

- One general gender budgeting training session
- One train-the-trainer session
- One tailored session with the Education Authority
- One tailored session with the UNISON women's committee
- One roundtable with Department of Finance officials, the OECD, and Scottish gender budgeting practitioners
- One information session with MLAs and policy officers through the NI Assembly Women's Caucus

Outside the project, NIWBG delivered:

- A session on gender budgeting and immigration policy with the Social Change Initiative's Black Leadership Programme
- Three follow-up engagement sessions with the UUP, SDLP, and Sinn Féin on the gender budgeting motion

As part of ongoing service support and engagement, NIWBG also engaged with the Department of Finance's Budget Sustainability Team to discuss equality and gender budgeting following the Assembly motion, supporting knowledge exchange and practical application across government.

### ***Holistic Person-Centred Support in the Northwest***

In 2025/26, Women Centre Derry delivered a comprehensive range of holistic, person-centred support services to women and families across the Derry~Londonderry area.

Over the year, we:

- Provided over 1,600 course places and engagement opportunities
- Supported 872 individual women, the majority of whom were experiencing economic inactivity and multiple barriers
- Delivered targeted support across key areas, including:
  - 355 women supported through wellbeing initiatives
  - 568 through good relations programmes
  - 340 addressing poverty-related needs
  - 353 supported into education and employment pathways
  - 592 engaged in child development programmes

We also supported children and young people, including:

- 356 children aged under 4
- 52 aged 5–9
- 49 aged 10–15
- 13 aged 16–18

Our programme delivery included a wide range of targeted initiatives such as Success Northwest, ESOL provision, the MA's programme supporting perinatal mental health, CONNECT promoting integration, YODA supporting children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, and the Recover Rebuild Renew programme supporting child development and family wellbeing.

In addition, we delivered a wide range of information sessions and workshops, equipping women with knowledge and access to services across areas including childcare, housing, community safety, benefits, food support, inclusion, health, carers' mental health, special educational needs, early years provision, and local early years organisations networking.



*Figure 9: Well attended Women's Centre Derry event providing a wide range of information to women.*

Our services supported women facing significant challenges, including poverty, long-term unemployment, social isolation, and experiences of violence and abuse. We remained committed to providing a safe, supportive environment where women can build confidence, improve wellbeing, and progress towards education, training, and employment.

In 2025/26, Women Centre Derry maintained strong and targeted engagement with women through outreach, programme delivery, and partnership working.

Our engagement was shaped by identified need, with a particular focus on:

- Ethnic minority women and families, through our involvement in the Community of Practice Forum and programmes such as ESOL, CONNECT and YODA
- Women and children in the early years, through our role within the Better Start in Life initiative and delivery of early years and family support programmes
- Women experiencing economic inactivity, informed by both our research and activities delivering education and employment support.

This ensured that our work prioritised those most at risk of exclusion and inequality.

Our programme of workshops and engagement activities played a key role in connecting women with essential services, increasing awareness, and supporting informed decision-making across a wide range of issues affecting their lives.

We also delivered targeted engagement activities focused on women's safety and tackling violence against women and girls, creating safe spaces for discussion and strengthening pathways to support.

Our involvement in cross-border initiatives, stakeholder events, and collaborative forums strengthened relationships across the community and statutory sectors, improving coordination and access to services for women.

Women Centre Derry continues to provide a trusted, welcoming, and accessible space where women can connect, build confidence, and have their voices heard.

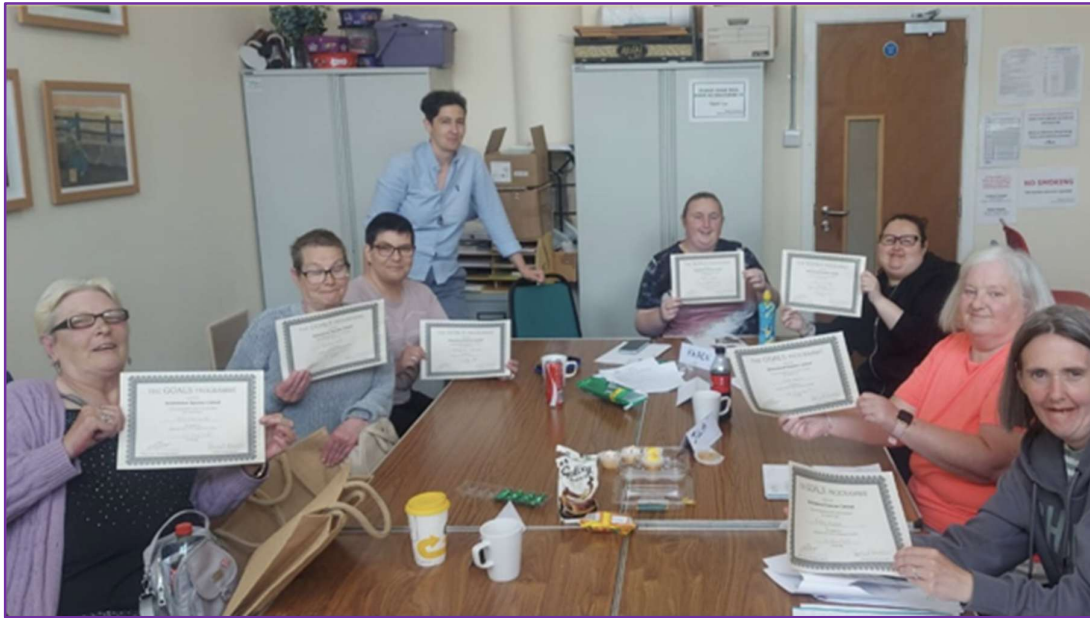
### ***Training and Health Promotion to meet women's needs***

Alongside strategic advocacy and policy work, WRDA delivers and supports community-based programmes that provide tangible benefits to women experiencing inequality, exclusion, and discrimination. These programmes are designed to be inclusive, trauma-informed, and responsive to local need, with a strong emphasis on participation and empowerment.

WRDA's Training and Development work continued to have a strong reach in 2025, particularly in health promotion. Breast, cervical, and bowel screening awareness sessions were delivered to a wide range of communities, including culturally diverse groups, Roma women, Deaf women, women with learning disabilities, and LGBTQ+ communities. Sessions were adapted to address language, literacy, and accessibility needs, ensuring women could engage with vital health information in ways that were meaningful and empowering.

The Community Facilitator Programme remained a cornerstone of WRDA's capacity-building work. By training disadvantaged women to deliver health and wellbeing interventions within their own communities, the programme uses a peer-to-peer model that builds trust, increases

engagement, and supports women into accredited learning and leadership roles.



*Figure 10: Women Breaking Barriers participants receive their certificates.*

The Women Breaking Barriers programme demonstrated significant impact, exceeding all participation and progression targets. Over 700 women from urban and rural areas engaged with the programme, receiving wraparound employability support, qualifications, and confidence-building interventions. Many participants progressed into employment, self-employment, or sustained training, highlighting the importance of holistic support in overcoming complex social and economic barriers.

WRDA's Maternal Advocacy and Support (Mas) project continued to deliver regionally, providing peer support, advocacy, and early intervention for women experiencing perinatal mental health challenges. Working through women's centres, affiliate groups, and young mums programmes, Mas combined direct support with training, policy influence, and awareness-raising. Women with lived experience were actively involved in service design, public speaking, and advocacy, ensuring maternal mental health policy and services are shaped by those most affected.

Through these programmes, WRDA strengthens women's confidence, wellbeing, and participation while also generating learning that feeds back

into advocacy, policy, and research—creating a coherent model of change from community to system level.

### **International Women’s Day**



*Figure 11: WRDA and supporters celebrate IWD.*

Many of the Consortium Partner organisations participate in the International Women’s Day Belfast march organised by Reclaim the Agenda. WRDA’s Director, Anne McVicker, is proud to serve as Reclaim the Agenda’s Treasurer and is also a founding member. The theme for International Women’s Day this year was ‘Strength in Solidarity’. This is a demand to end violence both globally and at home and a call for solidarity in the face of wars across the globe as well as the

violence women and girls face here in Northern Ireland.

The International Women’s Day march and rally were held on 7th March and was attended by about 2000 people. WRDA was proud to attend along with a wide range of feminist groups, LGBTQIA+ groups, Community allies, and Trade Unions. The rally had a really positive atmosphere and the energy to make change happen was palpable.

We heard from a wide range of speakers including former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson who spoke out about the impact of conflict on women in Iran and across the world as well as addressing the gendered impacts of climate change.

After the rally we kept the positive energy going at the WRDA and Raise Your Voice stalls in 2 Royal Avenue. We’d like to thank Reclaim the Agenda for organising a fantastic event filled with hope and solidarity.

### **7. Conclusion**

This report demonstrates the strength, reach and value of the Women’s Regional Consortium in amplifying women’s voices, influencing policy,

producing robust research, and delivering practical support in communities across Northern Ireland. At a time of continued social and economic pressure, the Consortium has remained committed to ensuring that women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated areas are heard, supported and represented. The work highlighted throughout this report shows not only what has been achieved over the past year, but also the importance of continued investment in women's organisations, lived experience, and collective action to build a more equal, inclusive and resilient future.



# Women Delivering Change



## Women's Regional **Consortium**

**c/o TWN  
Suite 2, Elizabeth House  
116-118 Hollywood Road  
Belfast BT4 1NY**

**Tel: 028 9031 9888  
Email: [info@wrda.net](mailto:info@wrda.net)**

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