



# nirwn

Northern Ireland  
Rural Women's Network

## ♀ RURAL VOICES

Action Research and Policy Priorities for Rural Women

March 2018



Supported by



## **Acknowledgements**

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Thanks are due to the membership of the NIRWN.

Since the inception of NIRWN in September 2006 our membership has shared with us their priorities, concerns and hopes for the future for themselves, their families and their rural communities. They continue to place their trust in our organisation to advocate on their behalf to work towards a rural community where women are respected and valued and where they have the opportunities, confidence and ability to visibly take up positions of power and influence in all areas of life.

We are grateful to those member groups who hosted focus groups to input into this research report for their generosity in sharing their experiences and those who took time to complete our online survey.

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<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page/s</b>
<b>NIRWN Foreword</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Context for Rural Women</b>	<b>5-9</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Childcare and Caring Responsibilities</b>	<b>10-14</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Rural Transport</b>	<b>15-16</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Social Isolation, Health and Wellbeing</b>	<b>17-19</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Poverty and the Economy</b>	<b>20-22</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Rural Development and Community Infrastructure</b>	<b>23-25</b>
<b>Chapter 6: Education and Training of Women</b>	<b>26-28</b>
<b>Chapter 7: BREXIT</b>	<b>29-33</b>
<b>Support Directory</b>	<b>34-42</b>

## **NIRWN Foreword**

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This report was identified by the NIRWN as an essential tool for rural women's groups moving forward in a period of political instability and change in our region. In 2015 NIRWN published a Rural Women's Manifesto through qualitative research with our membership. Rural women identified six key priority areas for advocacy: Caring responsibilities; Rural Transport; Rural Development; Education and Training of Women; Rural Women, Poverty and the Economy and Social Isolation, Health and Wellbeing.

The 'Rural Voices' Project supported by The Halifax Foundation for Northern Ireland allowed us to explore these priority areas in greater detail with specific focus groups and to identify key emerging issues.

The findings in this report identify why the initial six priority areas are critical to the advancement of rural women. In addition; it became clear through this research that an emerging policy priority for rural women since 2015 is, the potential implications of Brexit on rural women and their communities.

Key emerging issues since 2015 are that social isolation, the increasing burden of elder care have become even greater difficulties for rural women with the centralisation of service provision and lack of support in rural areas. Brexit was the other key change from 2015; rural women understand very clearly the potential impacts and indeed the current impacts of the UK decision to leave the EU and the lack of clarity on detail as to how it might be delivered in reality throughout our region coupled with our own political insecurity has left rural women fearful and feeling vulnerable.

It is our hope that this Report will be utilised by policy and decision makers when taking account of the impacts for rural women. It will also be a tool for the NIRWN membership groups and others to advocate on behalf of rural women; amplifying and articulating their voices at local, regional and strategic level.

*Louise Coyle*

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**Chapter 1: Context for Rural Women**

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## Background

Women in NI today are still economically, culturally and politically unequal. Women continue to struggle with dominant patriarchal values and structures in every sphere of private and public life and are underrepresented in public life and the political arena where change may be influenced and enacted. The process of social change in NI has been impacted by the NI Conflict<sup>1</sup> and, Post Good Friday Agreement policy making has not improved matters for women in NI<sup>2</sup>. The lack of gender parity that exists throughout Northern Irish society is, in our view, a key factor hindering the development of a new shared future.

This is amplified for women in rural areas due to Access Poverty<sup>3</sup>. The accessibility of: education, training, work and childcare provision and the cost and availability of public transport are factors in determining women's participation; particularly in rural areas<sup>4</sup>. Women in NI remain under represented in public<sup>5</sup> and political life<sup>6</sup> and rural women's participation in public and political life is further hindered by geography and distance from decision making spaces. The NIRWN advocate for the full implementation of international mechanisms UNSCR 1325<sup>7</sup> and CEDAW<sup>8</sup>. This would ensure gender balanced decision-making places such as NI Executive, local councils and boards. It is imperative that our region has 'visible' women at decision-making level if sustainable peace is to be achieved.

## Historic Funding Deficit for Rural Women

Even within the wider women's sector rural women still need a stronger voice<sup>9</sup> and support: *'There are also stark inequities between Government funding for service delivery to women's groups between rural and urban (1.3% v 98.7%)'*<sup>10</sup>. NIRWN provides the regional rural element of support to women through the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas Programme (funded by DAERA Rural Affairs Programmes). The vision of this Programme is: *That women living in disadvantage in both Urban and Rural will be provided*

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<sup>1</sup> **Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation**; Dr Helen Mc Laughlin

<sup>2</sup> **Review of Gender Issues in Northern Ireland**, Michael Potter NIAR 510-13, 2014

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/ofmdfm/1514.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> **TRPSI Framework** <https://www.daerani.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/dard/Final%20Version%20-%20Consultation%20Document%20on%20Proposals%20for%20Successor%20Framework.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> **Rural Women's Manifesto *Rural Women Speak*** NIRWN June 2015

[http://www.nirwn.org/nirwn%20rural%20women\\_s%20manifesto%20final%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.nirwn.org/nirwn%20rural%20women_s%20manifesto%20final%20(1).pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Women and Public Appointments in NI

[http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2014/assembly\\_exec\\_review/11914.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/11914.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Women in Politics and the NI Assembly

[http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/reports/assem\\_exec\\_review/women-in-politics.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/reports/assem_exec_review/women-in-politics.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

<sup>9</sup> Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015)

<sup>10</sup> Review of Government Funding for Women's Groups and Organisations, 2012

*with the specialist support they require to enable them to tackle disadvantage and fulfil their potential in overcoming the barriers that give rise to their marginalisation, experience of poverty and exclusion.*

An independent Evaluation of this Consortium work<sup>11</sup> concluded that rural women needed additional financial support in this Programme:

*‘The rural investment in proportional terms is not sufficient to animate and build critical mass versus urban interests (circa 20% of staff resources in the Consortium are linked to rural delivery i.e. two 25 hour posts in NIRWN) which is out of step with the proportion of rural dwellers in NI’*

It is imperative that women in rural areas have proposed future budgets assessed for rural impacts<sup>12</sup> to ensure the inequity of Government resourcing does not continue.

NIRWN understands the need to rationalise spend in the current economic climate. We would highlight that NI Government funding support for the work of our organisation (the only dedicated regional service to support rural women in their communities) is now 13% of what it was in 2007.

## **Political uncertainty**

### **Northern Ireland**

The period in which this research was undertaken 2017-2018 has been; and at time of publishing continues to be, a period of political uncertainty in the north of Ireland. On January 9th, 2017 deputy First Minister Martin Mc Guinness resigned<sup>13</sup> from our local devolved government, Stormont in protest. He cited the Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) conduct over the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scheme scandal as the main reason. Under the power-sharing arrangement of NI's devolved government Mr. Mc Guinness' resignation meant that First Minister Arlene Foster automatically lost office as First Minister. Sinn Fein had seven days (until 5pm on January 16, 2017) to appoint a new deputy First Minister. This did not happen, resulting in then Secretary of State James Brokenshire confirming that a snap election would be held on March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2017.

The election marked a significant shift in Northern Ireland's politics. Post-election Sinn Fein reiterated that it would not return to a power-sharing arrangement with the DUP without significant changes to the DUP's approach, including Arlene Foster not becoming First Minister until the RHI investigation was complete<sup>14</sup>. The parties had three weeks to form an

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<sup>11</sup> Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015)

<sup>12</sup> Rural Needs Act, 2016

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-38561507>

<sup>14</sup> 'No Revolt within the DUP' says Foster 6<sup>th</sup> March 2017 [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)

administration; failing that new elections would have to be called. Secretary of State, James Brokenshire gave the political parties more time to reach a coalition agreement after the March 27<sup>th</sup> deadline passed. On April 18<sup>th</sup> the Conservative Party Prime Minister, Theresa May then called a snap UK General Election for June 8<sup>th</sup>, with a new deadline of June 29<sup>th</sup> set for power-sharing talks<sup>15</sup>. The UK General Election saw both the DUP and Sinn Fein advance with the UUP and SDLP losing all their MP seats. The overall UK result saw the Conservatives losing seats, resulting in a hung Parliament. Theresa May continues as Prime Minister running a minority administration through the support of the DUP.<sup>16</sup>

A series of negotiation periods have been held to establish a local power-sharing agreement: June 2017; autumn 2017; February 2018. At the time of going to print the latest of these has been unfruitful and we are expecting the new Secretary of State Karen Bradley to impose a regional budget from Westminster.

This political uncertainty has had repercussions for the citizens of our region. With no Departmental Ministers in place: it has been impossible to pass any new legislation to improve the lives of our people; there has been a lack of strategic direction for Civil Servants and by proxy, citizens; there has been no official channels with which to lobby or to challenge decisions that have been previously taken. A Programme for Government<sup>17</sup> had been developed but currently remains a high-level policy document with no associated action plans or corresponding budget alignment. This vacuum of uncertainty has had the impact 'on the ground' of community organisations having to continue their service provision with no financial certainty for over a year; inhibiting their ability to strategically plan and in other cases having to close successful programmes.

## **Brexit**

In parallel with the local political uncertainty of our devolved government. The prospective withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union, Brexit has been unfolding. A referendum vote on 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 2016 indicated a 51.9%<sup>18</sup> majority in favour of leaving the EU. On 29 March 2017, The UK government invoked Article 50 of the Treaty of the European Union. The UK is due to leave the EU on 29th March, 2019. It is worth noting that NI voted to remain in the EU by a majority of 56%<sup>19</sup>.

The uncertainty created by Brexit for residents in NI include concerns about the following issues: transport of people, goods and services across the border region; rights which have

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<sup>15</sup> 'Stormont power-sharing talks deadline set for 29 June [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk) 21 April 2017

<sup>16</sup> Agreement between the Conservative and Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party on Support for the Government in Parliament-published June 26 2017

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/programme-government>

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu\\_referendum/results](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

been enshrined in EU law; higher education; agriculture; our past and current benefits from EU funding; the impact on our relationships with Great Britain, Ireland and the EU; cost of trading; and an inability to plan for the future on these issues until they are agreed and resolved.

This climate of political uncertainty was raised by every member we engaged with on this research. There is no doubt that these political machinations are impacting on ordinary citizens health and wellness and their hopes for the future. It is argued that our unique history, geography, politics and circumstances require particular consideration from the EU.

### **Legacy of Conflict and Peace-building in Rural Areas**

The notion of an 'interface' is a term which is principally used to describe the boundaries of sectarian division within Belfast. Research commissioned by Rural Community Network<sup>20</sup> noted that in most towns, villages and smaller settlements, there are no physical barriers dividing residential areas, and although some previous research has applied the terminology of 'interfaces' to rural areas, in reality this has largely described 'patterns of avoidance' rather than served to reflect the existence of tension and violence. The research nevertheless found that barriers do exist in many rural communities. These may not be physical or visible barriers, but they are barriers nonetheless, and they have real effects in constraining and shaping the behaviour and attitudes of both individuals and communities. There remains no overall coherent strategic government framework that focuses on segregation and contested spaces in smaller towns and rural areas. The research suggests that there has been a piecemeal approach to addressing the issue of segregation and division in rural communities and areas beyond Belfast.<sup>21</sup>

Distinctive features of peace building in rural communities are the investment of time to work with the pace and challenges of a traditional way of life, addressing invisible interfaces, providing personal support, working with Institutions, working in dispersed communities and addressing majority/minority dynamics. Networking, collaboration and genuine partnership within and between organisations and different sectors are vital to support effective peace building in rural communities<sup>22</sup>

The development and emergence of community and civic leaders; taking collective action to break the silence, and to share space, for the greater good, requires leadership from within, as well as encouragement and support from external agencies. Community development

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<sup>20</sup> **Beyond Belfast. Contested Spaces in Urban Rural and Cross Border Settings;** John Bell, Neil Jarman, Brian Harvey November 2010

<sup>21</sup> **Beyond Belfast. Contested Spaces in Urban Rural and Cross Border Settings;** John Bell, Neil Jarman, Brian Harvey November 2010

<sup>22</sup> **Rural Communities...Polite avoidance and denial-rhetoric or reality?;** Tony Macauley March 2013



offers active and potentially active individuals a process and a route they can use to lead and facilitate collective visioning and action.<sup>23</sup>

Building peace in rural areas and communities is all about supporting the processes that lead to an absence of violence and conflict; an absence of fear of violence, a flourishing of economic, social and political justice, peaceful co-existence and the shared 'democratic' use of power. The principles of community development (equality and anti-discrimination, social justice, collective action, community empowerment and working and learning together) clearly resonate with this. Key elements of peace building in rural areas relate to breaking the silence/s (including 'polite silence', avoidance and a 'tacit culture of silence'), learning to share space and the development of community and civic leaders prepared to engage in this type of challenging work. The application of community development principles in practice enables people to follow a very useful and structured process of working together to identify their needs; take action to exert influence on the decisions which affect their lives; and improve their quality of life and ultimately the quality of wider community life. It also provides a mechanism by which community and public agencies can work together to improve the quality of government.

United Nation Security Resolution 1325<sup>24</sup> recognises the important role played by women in the "prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction" the world over. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women<sup>25</sup> (CEDAW) has called on the UK government to ensure the full implementation of UNSCR1325 in Northern Ireland, but to date, this has not happened. The role of women in peace-building in our region has been largely ignored.

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<sup>23</sup> **The Role of Community Development in rural peace building;** Ann Mc Geeney, Kathy Walsh February 2013

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

## Chapter 2: Childcare and Caring Responsibilities

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It is part of our rural and cultural tradition in NI that women in families bear most of the caring responsibilities in terms of childcare, elder care and caring for those with a disability. Caring responsibilities often isolate women, particularly those in rural areas who may become excluded from fully participating in social, economic and community-based activities. Flexible, affordable, accessible quality childcare is very difficult to find in rural areas. Distance from work means rural women's childcare needs to start earlier and end later, up to two hours a day more than their urban counterparts. This can make childcare unaffordable and work/life balance unrealistic. The recent economic downturn has also had an impact on grandmothers, who are increasingly required to shoulder greater childcare responsibilities. The research shows that childcare provision is much more than a useful extra which 'helps' women to participate: it is more correct to say that without it, many women from disadvantaged and rural areas are entirely unable to consider education or work at all<sup>26</sup>.

According to 'Employers For Childcare' latest Childcare Costs Survey, the weekly cost of full-time childcare now costs on average £168 per week, or £8,736 per year approximately 40% of the average household income. Most worryingly many are reaching for high interest payday loans just to cover the costs of childcare<sup>27</sup>. The cost of childcare is often the main factor prohibiting access. Evidence<sup>28</sup> has also shown that for working parents the costs of childcare can be a route to in-work poverty.

The region of Northern Ireland needs a Childcare Strategy which mitigates against in-work poverty for low income families. NIRWN believes that if we are to give all our children the best start in life, then the cost of childcare should be linked more closely to the child and their needs not to their parents' income and benefits.

Calculating benefit entitlement can make it very difficult for families to assess whether a return to work or education and training is a financially viable option for them in their particular circumstances. This is an advice and support area that needs to be addressed particularly as there is an impending change to childcare vouchers to a tax free childcare scheme; vouchers are closing to new entrants from April 5, 2018<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation; compiled by Dr Helen Mc Laughlin

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-cost-survey-2016/>

<sup>28</sup> Working at the Edge: Childcare 2014

[http://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/WAE%20Childcare%20December%202014\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/WAE%20Childcare%20December%202014_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.moneysavingexpert.com/news/family/2018/02/want-childcare-vouchers-apply-now-to-make-sure-you-beat-the-april-deadline>

We can learn from Scotland, as devolved UK jurisdiction similar to ours. Scotland have had a Childcare Strategy in place which has been an advantage but has not been without its difficulties. NIRWN has identified from research<sup>303132</sup> that there is learning from the challenges facing Scotland that a NI Executive would clearly benefit from taking account of when developing a NI Childcare Strategy. The first lesson is that no single Department, person or organisation has taken responsibility for ensuring families have access to the affordable, high quality childcare they need in Scotland and this is having negative repercussions. Childcare is provided for at local authority level which effectively means not only a 'postcode lottery' but in addition means that there are not comparable statistics etc. to examine to ensure equity of delivery across the region. This has had a particularly negative impact on rural areas. Families in our region will need a lead Department to take responsibility for childcare. Undoubtedly the delivery of a Childcare Strategy for N.I. would require cross Departmental responsibilities and a partnership approach between; government, statutory, public, private and community/voluntary sectors. NIRWN recommends that there is one lead Department to ensure: effective roll out of Strategy actions; to coordinate Stakeholders, monitor and evaluate the Strategy and ensure equity of provision across the region.

In Scotland the lack of rural proofing or, taking account of rural needs has resulted in consistent evaluations of the Strategy identifying provision in rural areas as inadequate. An Executive here must rural proof any proposed Childcare Strategy if our region is not to experience the same outcome. It is not enough to identify rural areas as having inadequate provision, a NI Executive must take mitigating actions to address these inequalities if rural families and children are to experience equality. Following its inquiry into Women and Work, the Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee recommended that the Scottish Government take action towards the introduction of a statutory right to childcare including older children – up to the age of 15 – as well as disabled children.<sup>33</sup> This was backed by leading children and families organisations who have long campaigned for quality, affordable childcare with support for the childcare workforce.<sup>34</sup> These are actions that any NI Executive should consider committing to from the beginning of a Childcare Strategy.

The Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development established the Rural Childcare Stakeholders Group in 2007. The Stakeholders group published a report in 2008 entitled

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.childrenscotland.org.uk/sites/default/files/FinalChildcareCommissionReportJune2015.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> 'Growing Up in Scotland: Growing Up Rural' <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2008/03/12110107/0>

<sup>32</sup> Working at the Edge: Childcare

[http://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/WAE%20Childcare%20December%202014\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/WAE%20Childcare%20December%202014_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> 4th Report, 2013 (Session 4): Women and Work – Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee, June 2013 <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/64971.aspx>

<sup>34</sup> 'Right to childcare' timetable call from MSPs – BBC News, June 2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotlandscotland-politics-22943203>

“Rural Childcare: Investing in the Future”<sup>35</sup>. The report confirmed that rural areas do face particular and distinct challenges in relation to the delivery of and access to rural childcare services. The report made a number of recommendations for the then Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) along with other Government Departments as to how rural childcare services could be improved. The report recommended establishing a Rural Childcare Funding Programme “with the aim of addressing rural specific need and circumstance with particular focus on rural access”. Subsequently, DARD introduced a £1.5 Million Rural Childcare Programme to improve childcare provision in rural areas. The Programme was aimed at pilot projects run by community organisations that tackled a number of priority areas including: access to childcare services; early years integration; quality and safety of provision; sustainability and affordability. The evaluation of this Programme illustrated the need for and the value of a variety of approaches to meeting childcare needs. Rural areas are not homogenous and as such each area must assess its own needs and develop childcare solutions to meet these particular needs.

NIRWN and our membership would assert that any Childcare Strategy developed for NI ensures that a one size fits all approach is not applied to addressing rural childcare. In eleven years of consulting with our members childcare has been identified consistently in the top two issues (together with transport) for rural women. The feedback we have received is that cost and affordability is certainly an issue for rural families but equally is access to quality, flexible provision in many areas. It is our view that some areas are well provided for, in some cases saturated and in others, there are simply no local options. Our research suggests that we need a Childcare Strategy for NI to identify gaps in provision and ensure that rural families have a choice of flexible, affordable provision.

South Armagh Childcare Consortium (SACC)<sup>36</sup> had developed a variety of rural childcare solutions based on the needs of the area. One aspect which has evidenced particular success, was their aim to increase the number of registered childminders in their area. This involved a community development approach based on needs identified and local knowledge which resulted in a huge increase in childminders in the area; many of whom had changed from unregistered to registered during the course of their engagement with the Consortium. This is a model which could be replicated in other areas where the need is identified.

Informal childcare is often carried out by grandparents, particularly grandmothers. NIRWN’s 2015 research<sup>37</sup> indicated that the recent economic downturn has had a negative impact on grandmothers, who are increasingly required to shoulder greater childcare responsibilities. These caring responsibilities are unpaid and aside from the social isolation and impact on

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<sup>35</sup> [http://www.rdc.org.uk/download/files/pub\\_RuralChildcare.pdf](http://www.rdc.org.uk/download/files/pub_RuralChildcare.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.southarmaghchildcare.co.uk/>

<sup>37</sup> [http://www.nirwn.org/nirwn%20rural%20women\\_s%20manifesto%20final%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.nirwn.org/nirwn%20rural%20women_s%20manifesto%20final%20(1).pdf)

health and well-being they are in some cases, contributing to poverty. Members have reported that the cost of fuel; driving children to and from school and heating extra rooms in the house together with providing meals is creating difficult economic circumstances for them. This experience was echoed again when conducting focus groups for this research report: *'women are now child-minding their grandchildren on a full-time basis and are not free to attend social opportunities. It is assumed that the woman of the house will provide the care to whoever needs it in the family'*.

The lack of a NI Childcare Strategy since the Good Friday Agreement has played a huge role in ensuring it remains an urgent issue. The last consultation on a potential Childcare Strategy 'Delivering Social Change Through Childcare'-A Ten Year Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare 2015-2025 was issued by the then, Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister NI in November 2105. Prior to our current political impasse there was no update on its progress or potential implementation and associated action plan and budget.

Our economic climate has meant that we need a coordinated Strategy for Childcare in NI more than ever. NIRWN and our membership would like now to see an energetic, time bound progress to developing actions to go alongside a Childcare Strategy for NI which takes account of particular rural needs. Families in NI need actions, furthermore they need these actions resourced, led by one Department and robustly monitored and evaluated for success.

Elder care was identified in our research as an inhibiting factor to: rural women's participation; financial and employment security and on their mental health and well-being. *'Older women looking after older parents is on the increase, because the pension age is now 67 there isn't the opportunity to cut working hours to care for older parents so you either have to try and go to work and do the caring before and after work time (on call 24/7), go part time or give up work, that puts women in poverty!'* We are an ageing population; The percentage of the population that is 65 years or older is growing. It increased between 1975 and 2015, from 14.1% of the population to 17.8%. It is projected to continue to grow to nearly a quarter of the population by 2045<sup>38</sup>. Our health services are under increasing strain<sup>39</sup> trying to meet rising demand and still maintain standards. It is falling to family members and, particularly women to care for their ageing family members and they require more support than is currently available to them.

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<sup>38</sup> Overview of the UK Population-Office of National Statistics

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.itv.com/news/update/2017-01-09/nhs-buckling-under-strain-says-health-think-tank-ceo/>

## **Recommendations**

- **We need a Childcare Strategy for NI to identify gaps in provision and ensure that rural families have a choice of flexible, affordable provision.**
- **We need energetic, time bound progress to developing actions to go alongside a Childcare Strategy for NI which takes account of particular rural needs.**
- **More dedicated support for those providing (free) elder care.**

### Chapter 3: Rural Transport

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Women are much less likely to have access to their own private transport than men. This means that women depend much more on public transport and are at an economic disadvantage to men. The lives of rural women are affected directly and indirectly by their access to transportation. The absence of public transport in most rural areas makes the majority of women dependent on private automotive transportation. Rural women, like youths and seniors, are one of the groups that are most often 'transportation disadvantaged'. Research indicates that rural women have more limited access to family vehicles than do men.

The disadvantage women face in accessing reliable transportation affects their livelihoods, access to social services and impairs their ability to undertake the role of caregiver to family members. Lower incomes for women in rural communities mean that maintaining a vehicle may be beyond the reach of individuals, even when they need one to get to work<sup>40</sup> or access childcare. Female youth and seniors are doubly disadvantaged. Young women are less likely to have access to a car than their male friends, making them dependent on rides to work and social activities, sometimes with young men who have been drinking, or have already lost their licences<sup>41</sup>. It is well documented that women isolated on farms are especially vulnerable to abuse<sup>42</sup>; a situation worsened without a means of transport to allow for an independent exit.

Rural women's experience of work in the "new economy" often means multiple jobholding<sup>43</sup> highlighting the need for transportation options. Without reliable access to transportation, rural women face challenges in; getting to job interviews, maintaining employment outside the home, accessing childcare, performing household tasks and taking on voluntary activities.

The research conducted by NIRWN confirmed lack of access to transport as a major issue for rural women accessing education, training work and childcare. It was clear also that the picture regionally varies greatly depending on where you live; with West of the Bann having particularly poor infrastructure. Often provision is linked to the school terms, resulting in no service during holidays.

Bus frequencies and coverage are much poorer than in urban areas; our research particularly raised the issue of the lack of public transport after 6 pm. Over half of rural households'

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<sup>40</sup> Winson and Leach: *Contingent Work, Disrupted Lives: Labour and Community in the New Rural Economy*

<sup>41</sup> Dunkley 2004 *Risky Geographies: Teens, Gender, and Rural Landscape*

<sup>42</sup> Hornosty and Doherty 2004 'Resistance and change: Building a framework for helping abused rural women

<sup>43</sup> Ames et al. 2006; Leach et al. 2006 "I'm Just Glad My Three Jobs Could Be During the Day": Women and Work in a Rural Community. Volume 55, Number 1, pp. 119-131(13))

report 'never' using bus services<sup>44</sup>. Average journey lengths and commuting distances are 50% higher for those living in urban areas, and limited public transport necessitates a reliance on private transport<sup>45</sup>.

Road travel may be more difficult in rural than urban areas due to the problems such as uneven surfaces, occasional localised flooding and road standards which have become inadequate for the type and volume of traffic which is being carried in some areas. Some of these deficiencies may stem from inadequate investment and historic underfunding of road maintenance in rural areas<sup>46</sup>. The conditions of rural roads and the lack of safe pathways was raised again and again in our focus groups. People felt that it was unsafe to enjoy walking along the roads in the rural areas, in addition to the difficulty posed by driving.

#### **Recommendations:**

- **Develop an integrated rural transport strategy is required which takes account of the historic deficit of transport options available in rural areas.**
- **Develop a programme of improvement to rural infrastructure, roads and transport provision routes.**
- **A review of transport times available in rural areas. There must be transport options made available post 6pm; in particular for young people.**
- **Recognition that lack of transport options and availability has an adverse impact on quality of life for rural women.**

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<sup>44</sup> Sub Regional Transport Plan 2015, Department for Regional Development

<sup>45</sup> Travel Survey for NI (TSNI) urban-rural report 2011-2013

<sup>46</sup> Sub Regional Transport Plan 2015, Department for Regional Development



## Chapter 4: Poverty and the Economy

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The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs NI have stated; that '*the cost of living is more expensive in rural areas, particularly in terms of fuel, transport and heating*'<sup>47</sup>. Research by Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>48</sup> echoes this; people in rural areas of the UK typically need to spend 10-20% more on their everyday needs than those in towns and cities, and these costs increase according to the remoteness of the area. People in rural areas generally need to work and earn well above the minimum wage to make ends meet but, since many rural jobs are poorly paid, many people have substantially less than they need, even if they work<sup>49</sup>.

Household incomes, poverty rates and the labour market have all worsened in the last five years. The farming and the construction industry, which once sustained and extended families through male employment, can no longer do so. This has resulted in the need for rural women to take on extra work or return to the workplace, often in part-time, low paid jobs. Paid work is not equal for women and men. Two thirds of those earning minimum wage or below are women and women's annual earnings are on average 33% below that of men. The poverty rate for pensioners is higher in NI than in other parts of the UK with nearly half a million pensioners in NI living below the poverty line, including fuel poverty.

Over three fifths of individuals in poverty in Northern Ireland are in households with at least one adult in work<sup>50</sup>. Research suggests how poverty of this kind may correlate with the impact of recent recession and ongoing austerity on housing costs, wage stagnation and working-age benefits.<sup>51</sup> Whilst the Westminster Government has developed strategies to combat poverty, especially for children and pensioners, there is no strategy to challenge women's poverty specifically.

The impacts of Welfare Reform and Universal Credit are also disproportionately affecting women<sup>52</sup>. Our members shared with us many personal reflections on the impact of Welfare Reform on them and their families. This is particularly significant as Universal Credit has only started its implementation in NI and the impacts only beginning to be felt.

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<sup>47</sup> Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation-A New Framework, DARD, March 2016

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010 A Minimum Income Standard for Rural Areas

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

<sup>50</sup> Department for Communities, 'The Northern Ireland households below average income report (2015-16) is released' (DFC). 2017. <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-households-below-average-income-report-2015-16-released>

<sup>51</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 'In work poverty hits record high as the housing crisis fuels insecurity'. 2016. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/press/work-poverty-hits-record-high-housing-crisis-fuels-insecurity>.

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/resource/0043/00432337.pdf>

PIP (Personal Independence Payments), which is replacing DLA (Disability Living Allowance) payments, assessments were identified by those we spoke with as being particularly challenging and contributing to mental ill health due to the stress these assessments and findings were having on individuals and their families. A focus group participant indicated that the experience of assessment meant her husband (living with a disability from birth) was not going to appeal his assessment or, ever undergo assessment again as he felt the impact on his mental health and wellness was so detrimental. Inevitably the loss of payment will have a detrimental impact on the whole family and their quality of life.

These negative experiences of PIP assessments in particular, have been echoed across the region by local politicians and the charity sector to the extent that the Department for Communities has commissioned an independent review<sup>53</sup> open from January 15, 2018 to March 16, 2018 and has requested a call for evidence from organisations and individuals who have information that is relevant to how the PIP assessment is operating both for new claims and Disability Living Allowance (DLA) reassessment claims. It is difficult to know what actions the Department for Communities may be able to take as a result of the review findings, given that we currently have no Stormont Executive in place and Welfare Reform has its origins in Westminster.

Women are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the recession due to their weaker positioning in the labour market<sup>54</sup>, they are also disproportionately impacted by subsequent austerity measures due in part to the dependency on partner and state income that accompanies this positioning.<sup>55</sup>

In addition, NIRWN research suggests that those in the rural west are experiencing more deprivation; inevitably as they are often more rurally remote and experiencing greater access poverty. It is clear to NIRWN from what our members share with us; that farming families in

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<sup>53</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/consultations/pip-independent-review-assessment-process-northern-ireland>

<sup>54</sup> K. Rake, 'Are women bearing the burden of the recession?' Fawcett Society: London, 2009. On this, see A. Rafferty, 'Gender equality and the impact of recession and austerity in the UK'. In A. Eydoux, A. Math and H. Périvier (eds) *European Labour Markets in Times of Crisis a Gender Perspective*. OFCE. 2014. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-de-l-ofce-2014-2.htm>. See also J. Rubery and A. Rafferty, 'Gender, recession and austerity in the UK.' In M. Karamessini and J. Rubery (eds) *Women and Austerity: the Economic Crisis and the Future of Gender Equality*, London: Routledge, 2013.

<sup>55</sup> It is estimated that austerity-driven tax and benefit change in the United Kingdom since 2010 has taken a total of £79 billion from women, as compared to £13 billion from men. This figure was calculated based on losses apportioned to the individual within households receiving payments. H. Stewart, 'Women bearing 86% of austerity burden, Commons figures reveal', *The Guardian*, 9 March 2017. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/09/women-bearing-86-of-austerity-burden-labour-research-reveals>. See Fawcett Society, 'The impact of austerity on women, policy briefing', Fawcett Society: London, 2012; and, L. James and J. Patiniotis, 'Women at the cutting edge: why public sector spending cuts in Liverpool are a gender equality issue', Liverpool John Moores University: Liverpool, 2013. See also Rafferty, op. cit.; and, Rubery and Rafferty, op. cit.

particular, are often fairly asset rich: land, property and machinery but extremely cash poor and struggle to provide for their families, resulting in high levels of anxiety leading to ill health. Through this research rural women shared with us the shame associated with acknowledging or, articulating financial problems; this was exacerbated when those issues related to benefits: *'It is difficult to remember that your benefits are entitlements, not a hand out'*.

**Recommendations:**

- **Recognition by policy makers that Financial Poverty and Access Poverty are clearly linked. Rural women cannot address their financial poverty if they lack access to suitable transport and childcare.**
- **The impact of Welfare Reform needs to be monitored for impact and local mitigations enacted where necessary. It is not sufficient to leave the burden of support on the Community/voluntary and charitable sectors.**
- **Rural Needs Impact assessment to acknowledge that it costs more to live in rural areas.**

## Chapter 5: Health & Wellbeing, Social Isolation

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Rural life in the UK is often portrayed as idyllic, countryside living where life is slower and the beauty of the surroundings compensates for the lack of services that may be available in an urban setting. This can be the case; rural life has a lot to offer. This image does not however account for the impact of lack of service provision on health and wellbeing. Rural Women's Groups and Rural Community Groups offer a vital link to rural women and their families in reducing social isolation; providing activities; a base for service delivery and often, bespoke support. This work has been historically under resourced (*1.3% rural v 98.7% urban spend*<sup>56</sup>) yet has the potential to save the economy by addressing the inevitable Health & Wellbeing impacts of social isolation. Rural women experiencing domestic violence are more vulnerable due to their social isolation and distance from service support.

Northern Ireland is a region emerging from conflict and research<sup>57</sup> indicates that recognition has been growing of the social, economic, and political legacy of the Troubles, particularly of the transgenerational effect of conflict-related trauma on the mental health of the population. Concern continues about the effect of austerity. Findings from the Northern Ireland component of the World Mental Health Survey, undertaken in 2008, showed that mental health disorders are prevalent and often associated with exposure to the conflict. Researchers<sup>58</sup> believe that the key challenges for mental health promotion and suicide prevention in Northern Ireland relate not only to mental health care and tackling of stigma, but also to limitation of the effect of austerity, recognition of the changed social context in Northern Ireland, and increased connectedness to and engagement with vulnerable groups.

When embarking upon our own research; our members were offered a choice of focus topics for their focus groups; overwhelmingly (80%) selected 'Health, Wellbeing and Social Isolation' as a priority area of interest for their Group. This reflects their awareness that part of their function is addressing social isolation and contributing to the health and wellness of their members.

Our research uncovered that many rural women felt that they were '*becoming more isolated, with many of our support agencies being located in urban settings*'. Health appointments were consistently raised as an issue; both G.P. appointments and hospital appointments. These are an extra burden to rural women as they are very often caring for both elderly relatives and young children and as such are tasked with organising the transportation to

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<sup>56</sup> Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015)

<sup>57</sup> Mental Health and Suicide Risk in Northern Ireland: A Legacy of the Troubles; Rory C O'Connor, University of Glasgow and Siobhan O'Neill, Ulster University; June 2015

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

appointments. Those we engaged with did acknowledge that they found it easier now with hospital appointments to book an appointment at a time that suited you; taking account of travel time. A difficulty cited was that often to access of the soonest available appointment time it meant not attending your local hospital and enduring a longer round trip; a particular challenge for the elderly. Transport was also raised as an issue; those in rural areas said they found it was necessary to have access to your own transport to attend hospital; due to lack of public transport and not knowing how long you may be at the hospital making it impossible to plan return. Research indicates that costs 'saved' by the NHS in centralising services are in reality simply transferred to patients<sup>59</sup>. Rural dwellers, particularly those without private transport, are likely to be most disadvantaged by these changes. A recent study of a remote rural community in NI, it was found that district nurses had been withdrawn, GP surgeries had become larger and less personalised and GP out of hours services were located at substantial distances<sup>60</sup>.

Several of NIRWN's research focus groups raised concern about access to mammograms. It seems that community groups are familiar with the 'Action Cancer-Big Bus'<sup>61</sup> and consider it intrinsic to the health service. They did not distinguish that this was a service resourced and delivered by a charity and were concerned that the frequency of when the 'bus' was in their area was reducing and that examination appointments difficult to acquire and oversubscribed. Experience of G.P. services varied greatly depending on location and examining this in the regional context the NIRWN's observations on this issue are that there is not equity across the region in how G.P. services are delivered. Appointment availability; booking systems; available clinics etc very much depend wholly on the General Practice and their own systems and guidelines.

There was a consensus amongst our research participants that centralisation of support services was impacting on their communities locally; not just in terms of access poverty but also the removal of regular meeting points e.g. the Post Office which provided both, a reason to leave the house and often a structure and social occasion e.g. on pension day.

There was agreement amongst those surveyed that rural women needed a place to meet and a reason to meet up. The conversations around this primarily linked inextricably to the provision of education and training for women in rural areas and the lack thereof. In relation to addressing social isolation those we spoke with concurred that being able to provide any class locally should it be: yoga; craft classes; information talks etc. created a mechanism to engage those who were socially isolated. Our member groups operate within their local area

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<sup>59</sup> Mungall, I.J. Trend towards centralisation of hospital services, and its effects on access to care for rural and remote communities in the UK, *Remote Rural Health*, 2005 Apr-Jun; 5 (2)

<sup>60</sup> Heenan, D (2010) Rural ageing in Northern Ireland: Quality of Life Amongst older People

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.actioncancer.org/How-We-Help/Big-Bus>

and as such hold local knowledge such as; who has recently suffered a bereavement; who is experiencing a difficult time, who has overwhelming caring responsibilities and as such; they quietly and discreetly attempt to engage these people in their activities and offer to bring them along. This however is only possible if they are in a position to deliver activities locally without exception all were finding that *'It is increasingly difficult to find funding to support overheads like room rental to be able to run any activities'*.

Our members can clearly identify themselves the impact of social isolation on health and wellness and the community-based activities and education can have on addressing this. They did not believe that decision makers; particularly at government level understood the impact that small amounts of money invested in local rural groups could potentially save the health sector; which is currently in crisis.

#### **Key Recommendations:**

- **Historic government underinvestment of rural women and their activities needs redressed.**
- **Rural women need access to small pots of funding to provide activities and resources to meet up locally on a regular basis to address social isolation.**
- **Acknowledgement amongst policy makers of the link between social isolation and mental health and well-being. Resourcing activities that alleviate social isolation will inevitably impact positively on the health sector.**

## Chapter 6: Rural Development and Community Infrastructure

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Rural women play a vital role in farm families, businesses and as entrepreneurs. Whilst the Rural Development Programme for NI provides a strong platform for women's needs to be articulated, women continue to be an underrepresented group across Programmes to date. *'The new 2014-2020 Programme needs to be made accessible to rural women'* say NIRWN members. The Rural Development Programme has the potential to be transformative for rural women by engaging them in decision making; supporting entrepreneurship; improving villages and developing rural tourism, but rural women must be recognised as a target group and actively sought to engage in the Programme. At present this is still not happening at the level that is needed. Only one<sup>62</sup> of the appointed Local Action Groups has met the recommended requirement of 50:50 gender balanced Board of Directors. This is inevitably impacting on the gender balance of assessment panels which are distributing the resources at local level with only one Local Action Group<sup>63</sup> achieving gender balanced assessment panels and some panels having one hundred per cent male representation.

This debate is further complicated by concern at uncertainty over the wider relationship between Brexit and rural wellbeing in Northern Ireland (at the level of the economic and beyond), drawing on insight that rural areas (border regions especially) could be particularly vulnerable to any post-Brexit economic downturn and loss of European Union funding. In light of the end of the EU Rural Development Programme funding in 2020 and the lack of any indigenous Rural Development policy; rural women and their communities will be particularly vulnerable.

Rural Community Support Structures are the backbone and the lifeblood of rural communities; where rural communities are thriving, it is inevitably being driven by a vibrant community support structure. Those communities that lack rural community support structures are left experiencing further social and financial deprivation and inevitably a lack of community 'on the ground' expertise to address it. It is NIRWN's observation working with our membership that success breeds success; where a community Group/Network are successful in securing funding and support to deliver one service for their area; they can more easily secure further funding and support for more services. This is good news; however, we witness some rural areas with a very strong community support structures and others with virtually none.

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<sup>62</sup> Mid Ulster Local Action Group

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

Recent financial planning scenarios by DAERA NI for the Department of Finance proposed a complete cessation of funding for all Rural Affairs support<sup>64</sup>. These proposals were developed without Ministerial input or cross Departmental discussion due to the lack of Executive in NI. It is the view of NIRWN and our members that such an action would fundamentally alter the role and function of DAERA. It is our belief that a decision to remove all funding for rural affairs programmes within the Department is a decision that is outside of the scope of officials and could only be made by elected members. The upcoming budget is the first proposed budget which is required by the Rural Needs Act 2016 to take account of rural needs and mitigate as necessary. As such we would expect to see a rebalancing of funding for rural women in line with the Programme for Government Outcome ‘We prosper through a strong, competitive, *regionally balanced economy*’. This should mean an increase in resources for rural women in real terms and not a cessation of support. The current proposals would mean women in our two cities would receive support (through [Regional Infrastructure Support Programme](#)) but rural women could expect none.

Recent departmental commissioned research underlined the distinct need for, and meaningfulness and effectualness of, this rural provision, noting, for example, that ‘the rural element of the [Consortium] is *highly rated* by the rural women’s groups/women they serve’, and that the contribution such rural endeavour makes to ‘central government policy influence ... is of *key importance* to the rural constituency<sup>65</sup>’.

This rural provision originated in policy development that specifically recognised the additional interacting structural barriers affecting disadvantaged women in rural isolation, such as lack of access to transport and local service provision. Such shortfalls may be partly associated with enduring government underinvestment in rural affairs, as compared to urban. Current funding of the wider women’s sector reflects this rural/urban imbalance.

In relative terms the budget of £1.8 million for the TRPSI resource budget is a small amount of money to cover the whole of rural Northern Ireland. The same size of budget is applied to small geographical communities in urban settings in programmes such as Neighbourhood Renewal. Rural communities have never had these levels of budgets or investments.

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<sup>64</sup> <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/articles/briefing-northern-ireland-budgetary-outlook-2018-20>

<sup>65</sup> Morrow Gilchrist Associates, op. cit., p.40-41. High levels of satisfaction among ‘women on the ground’ was also noted in respect of Consortium work at large. Ibid. p. 20 and p.22.



### **Key Recommendations:**

- **Historic government underinvestment of rural women and their activities needs redressed.**
- **Rural Affairs Funding needs to be retained and, taking account of Brexit, resourcing increased**
- **Government to be able to identify and support particular areas that have weak and low community support structures and build their capacity.**
- **Clarity from decision makers as to how rural development and community infrastructure in rural NI will be resourced post-Brexit**
- **Local Action Groups need to be supported to redress the current gender imbalance**
- **Recognition of the role of rural community infrastructure in peace-building**

## Chapter 7: Education & Training of Women

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The right to education is one of the most important means to achieve gender equality. Education and training need to be delivered over the course of a lifetime, adapting to changing life circumstances and reflecting rural women's needs at the time. Community based education and training for women is imperative in rural areas. It is a fundamental building block in supporting women to rebuild confidence and capability to enter the work place, and as a means to access lifelong learning in its own right to maintain overall wellbeing.

Community based education is generally delivered based on the local community need, and as such takes account of the complexity of women's lives and barriers to education such as childcare, course fees and academic environment. There is currently no mainstream funding of community education outside of F.E. Colleges whose remit is: 'F.E. means business'; the colleges are located in cities and large towns and deliver very little outreach training. Their ethos is not holistic; they do not recognise the value of delivering unaccredited training which often the first step for women re-entering education or considering a return to the workplace. This ethos does not take account of older learners who may have no desire to contribute to 'business' but wish to learn, socialise and develop.

Research by the Women's Regional Consortium<sup>66</sup> identifies that, in some (rural) cases, a total absence of any kind of community provision was reported. In large part, this absence was attributed to funding deficits that reflected longstanding rural/urban statutory resourcing differentials across the sector, captured as 'historic underinvestment in rural areas'. Recent government research on this subject has given some indication as to the scale of the underinvestment, acknowledging that *'compared with levels of government funding to women's groups in urban areas, there was a relatively low level of government funding to rural women's groups'*.

In the past the WEA NI and EGSA to a lesser extent were able to plug the gap of central government funding to community education in rural areas. These organisations delivered services at the point of need using a community development approach. They consulted with those in the local area/group/community organisation to establish their needs and they delivered training at a time/day of the week/location that worked for them. This is the key to successful delivery of any Programme or Project in a rural area. The beginning of the recession marked the closure of these regional support organisations which happened parallel to less flexibility for training with EU Peace monies and a distillation of the DEL NI

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<sup>66</sup> WRC Community-based women's education/training: Women's perceptions of gaps in provision September 2014

values to 'FE means business'. As a result, there is a lack of community education and training provision in both accredited and non-accredited for rural women in their own areas. Those we spoke to as part of this research recognised the impact of this loss of service for local women: *'We need to return to the WEA methodology of delivering training at the local point of need. Our women's Groups are disappearing for lack of hands on community development support'*.

It is evidenced in Chapter 5 of this Report the connection between local training provision and social isolation. Those we spoke to over the timeline of this research clearly identified the link in being able to offer or participate in training locally to improved mental health, confidence and self-esteem: *'there's a great need and desire for more support and activities in this area'*.

This was echoed in the 2014 WRC research<sup>67</sup>, which explored reported gaps in provision; one rural provider described how 'locally based free provision has almost disappeared'. In some rural cases, identified gaps in provision equated to the total absence of local provision. As one rural survey respondent put it, 'there is no training where I live [which is a] very remote area, all services [are] located at least 12 miles away', while another reported 'a lot of training is Belfast based and, when I ask for it, it very often is not available outside of Belfast'. Rural respondents complained that in some instances locally delivered provision did not respond to locally identified needs analysis but rather to 'top down' analysis carried out by 'regional training bodies, DEL and DARD', so that there was sometimes 'no consultation with [the] community on what [was] needed'. One respondent attributed this apparent lack of alignment between bottom-up needs analysis and local delivery to 'officials in Belfast – DEL, DARD, TWN etc. ... [who] are only worried [about] meeting targets... [thinking] they know'.

Women are outliving men in a population which is living longer but lacks the infrastructure to support this emerging demographic. Many rural women have embraced self-employment and entrepreneurship but would like support to achieve sustained business success. They require networking opportunities, mentoring and training and support that is not just focused on extra job creation and export. Rural women told us that they would also like embryonic start up business support that is not focused on farm diversification, for those women who are considering self-employment but do not live on a farm. Without a thriving rural economy, rural way of life is under threat.

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<sup>67</sup> WRC Community-based women's education/training: Women's perceptions of gaps in provision September 2014

**Key Recommendations:**

- **Resourcing of education and training that addresses rural needs**
- **Community education centrally funded**
- **Provision of advice and support for rural start ups and small rural businesses**
- **Resourcing to take account of overhead costs**

## Chapter 8: BREXIT

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Rural areas are home to 40% of the NI population<sup>68</sup>. There has been no substantial, dedicated mainstream rural development fund in Northern Ireland and its Border Areas; we have relied on European funding since the early 1990's. Similarly, the Community/Voluntary infrastructure and support in rural NI has been heavily funded through European Peace money and European Social Fund finance. Post Brexit this finance will not be available and together with no European Rural Development Programme; no Common Agricultural policy and no Single Farm payments; monies that are currently sustaining rural communities and families in NI will be gone. NIRWN members know this *'Europe has been positive for rural communities and farm businesses. It remains to be seen what the future holds and how much support will be available from the UK government post-Brexit'*. 98% of our members have said they are 'concerned' about the impact of Brexit on them, their families and their communities.

NI is a post-conflict society still in transition and the potential impacts on peace of reinstating a 'hard' border between the north of the island of Ireland and the rest of the island are very real. Those families who live along the border areas have indicated to NIRWN that not only are they worried about the peace impacts on their communities, but their lives are such that they live and work traversing the border several times a day and they cannot envisage how their economic and social lives could be sustained with reinstating the border. *'I live on the border area and am very concerned as to freedom of movement and the possible impact on the Peace Process if the Border is closed again'*.

The Brexit referendum campaign at a UK level was built on a narrative of Britishness and 'taking back control' of our laws, borders and sovereignty fuelled further divisions in the ethnopolitical identity in Northern Ireland. The impact of these narratives has been one which has increased inter-community tension and has created a new identity marker locally. Moreover, the impact of UK identifying people losing access to EU citizenship and Irish identifying people retaining the rights attached to EU citizenship creates a potentially polarising difference in the enjoyment of rights between the two main communities in Northern Ireland.

Under the terms of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, there is recognition of the 'birth-right of all people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland'. This creates a category of people born and living

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<sup>68</sup> NISRA

within the UK who will have access to EU citizenship in perpetuity. This means that people from Northern Ireland who choose to be Irish citizens will have access to EU citizenship rights, whereas people who choose to be British will not. By its very nature this distinction risks creating new tensions between the two main communities in Northern Ireland.

The EU Withdrawal Bill<sup>69</sup> has the potential to adversely impact on the social and human rights of NI citizens. Many of the rights that women in NI take for granted; Maternity rights, human rights etc have been developed, protected and defended by EU law; this is no longer the case and women in NI are worried that the equalities they do enjoy are now at risk again.

EU law has had a significant impact on the rights of women, especially in the areas of economic activity and employment law<sup>70</sup>. UK membership of the EU has led to significant improvements in the rights of women at work. EU law has extended rights to equal pay and strengthened protection from sex discrimination. It has improved the treatment of pregnant women and new mothers in the workplace and introduced new entitlements for parents to take time off. Many women also benefited from basic rights, like paid holiday, that were introduced at EU level – many of the two million workers who had no paid holiday before the Working Time Directive were part-time women<sup>71</sup>.

The EU has been particularly important in extending the scope of equality protections for women in the workplace. Some of the most significant developments relate to the protection against discrimination on grounds of pregnancy and maternity. Discrimination on grounds of pregnancy or maternity continues to be a serious problem for women's full participation in the work force in NI, as demonstrated in a recent report by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland<sup>72</sup>. This discrimination impacts on women's lives in a variety of ways. As well as impacting on their ability to work and salary, it can also negatively impact women's self-confidence, family life and mental and physical health. This reaffirms the need for structural change and recognises that when dealing with systematic gender discrimination it is often necessary to take positive action to redress historic underrepresentation and to ensure that women are properly represented in all areas of public life.

Many of the improvements in working women's rights have come from EU case law – court rulings that then had to be followed in similar cases across all member states. But if Britain left the EU, the UK government would be free to override any judgement that improved workers' rights. Women not in the EU, will not benefit from any future gains. For example, a

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<sup>69</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/2017-2019/0005/18005.pdf>

<sup>70</sup> Rights at Risk, Human Rights Consortium <http://www.humanrightsconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/RIGHTS-AT-RISK-Final.pdf>

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/WomenandEU.pdf>

<sup>72</sup> Expecting Equality, Equality Commission, 2016  
[http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/Expecting\\_Equality-PregnancyInvestigation-FullReport.pdf?ext=.pdf](http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/Expecting_Equality-PregnancyInvestigation-FullReport.pdf?ext=.pdf)

new consultation of trade unions and employers has just begun at EU level on a new package of rights to improve work/life balance, including proposals for carers' leave, flexible working and stronger protections from dismissal for new mothers<sup>73</sup>. NIRWN members expressed shock that their rights that they believed had been established and were protected were no longer secure post Brexit. They felt that this aspect of Brexit was not being explored by the media and expressed that they felt this was because *'it affects women most'*. One woman perhaps articulated it best when she said; *'We are supposed to be improving things, leaving a better legacy for our daughters and granddaughters; they will be so much worse off after Brexit'*.

Northern Ireland is still waiting for an updated Gender Equality Strategy and Action Plan. The last Gender Equality Strategy<sup>74</sup> was ready for an update in 2016. There have been several attempts to develop an updated strategy, but this has been impeded by elections; changes in Ministers; government departments and in the last year the political impasse. The result is that there is no current Gender Equality Strategy or Action Plan for NI. It also means that associated outworking of a Strategy such as; an annual update of Gender Equality Statistics has not happened since 2015<sup>75</sup>. Those we consulted with were of the view that women are *'last on the list, we are simply not a priority'*.

The Good Friday Agreement<sup>76</sup> recognised that equality and rights were of particular concern in NI and the GFA proposed a Bill of Rights for NI. This has never been developed or implemented in the interceding twenty years (although ten years were spent on its development). It is NIRWN's view that for the women of NI this should be progressed as soon as possible, particularly since the EU Withdrawal Bill.

NIRWN members have expressed concern that the current political stalemate in NI is adversely impacting on Northern Ireland's ability to participate in Brexit planning and negotiations. There is no unified Northern Irish voice. NI did not have a majority vote in favour of Brexit and our two largest parties have opposing views on the issue. This is adding to the fear and uncertainty rural women feel about this issue. The women we spoke with over the year of our action research did not feel that Brexit should be an *'Orange and Green issue'*; the overwhelming view was that Brexit *'will affect us all'*. One of the areas that women's groups have raised consistently before and since the referendum on whether the UK should leave the EU is the underrepresentation of women's voices in the debate. This was something that was highlighted as an issue in advance of the EU referendum and continues

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<sup>73</sup> <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/WomenandEU.pdf>

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/gender-equality-strategy>

<sup>75</sup> [https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm\\_dev/gender-equality-strategy-statistics-2015-update.pdf](https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm_dev/gender-equality-strategy-statistics-2015-update.pdf)

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-belfast-agreement>

to be a concern with the gender breakdown of the UK negotiating team being a particular issue. Northern Ireland is particularly poorly represented when it comes to women in politics and while this has improved somewhat recently with increased numbers of women returned as MLAs and with the leadership of three of the five main parties now being led by women, this has not translated into a more inclusive discussion on Brexit. The current political instability in Northern Ireland and the inability of the parties to agree to restore the executive and devolved administration has made it harder for voices from Northern Ireland to be heard in the Brexit debates and this is made even more acute for women who face multiple obstacles to having their voice heard. It is vital that women are assured a platform to have their voice heard so they can influence both the local decision-making which will impact on women's rights in Northern Ireland and also the UK-wide decisions of the Westminster government. In addition, it is vital that the negotiations between the EU and the UK Government make space to hear women's voices and concerns and to address the very real risks to rights which women face in the Brexit process<sup>77</sup>.

The U.K. Women's Budget Group has asserted that women will adversely experience economic impacts of Brexit<sup>78</sup>. The economic impact of Brexit is likely to be damaging to women. This is because Brexit is likely to have a detrimental impact on GDP. There will be specific impacts on women as workers, as users of public services and as consumers due to women's and men's different economic positions, roles in fulfilling caring responsibilities and power<sup>79</sup>. Our members articulated very clearly that they are already experiencing negative economic impacts as a result of Brexit. One member said she felt her family was '*being held to ransom economically*'. Her particular story exemplifies the complexities of Brexit impacts in the NI region in comparison to the rest of the UK. This person and her husband had been saving for several years to do some construction work on their home. As a result of impending Brexit; they no longer felt they were free to spend this money as they had planned. Their child, currently in sixth form studies, wished to progress to third level education at a university in Dublin. The university has guaranteed its fees for students from the north of Ireland for this year but cannot guarantee that when they child is ready to apply that they will not be viewed as an 'International' student, no longer an EU member and as such subject to much higher fee rates. In addition, the woman's husband has a job with a company whose business traverses the border on a daily basis, as such the company fear they are facing an uncertain future in which they cannot envisage that they will not be subject to increased tariffs to continue to trade. This may result in job losses, pay cuts and potentially business dissolution.

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<sup>77</sup> Rights at Risk, Human Rights Consortium <http://www.humanrightsconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/RIGHTS-AT-RISK-Final.pdf>

<sup>78</sup> <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/brexit-pre-budget-nov-2017-final.pdf>

<sup>79</sup> Rights at Risk, Human Rights Consortium <http://www.humanrightsconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/RIGHTS-AT-RISK-Final.pdf>



Brexit poses the biggest challenge to NI life economically and constitutionally in at least a generation some have argued since The Government of Ireland Act, 1920<sup>80</sup> and partition. Those we spoke to for this research were clear that *'there are so many ways to get it wrong and make things worse for us'* and the lack of clarity; a regional voice in the discussions and clear, cohesive leadership is increasing fear for the future post Brexit.

### **Key Recommendations**

- **Clarity on actual implications of Brexit on NI**
- **Development of A Bill of Rights for NI**
- **An updated Gender Equality Strategy and Action Plan for NI**
- **Measures to ensure women are equally represented at all discussions on Brexit and its out-workings. Implementation of UNSCR 1325.**
- **Elected representatives to ensure no loss of rights for women in post Brexit**
- **Ethos of Good Friday Agreement recognition of identities to be retained post Brexit**
- **A soft border solution**
- **Extra resources for rural areas to navigate the impacts of Brexit: economics; peace; funding etc. Taking account of the historic deficit of funding for rural women**
- **Development of a bespoke NI rural development policy**

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<sup>80</sup> [http://web.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Partition\\_of\\_Ireland](http://web.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Partition_of_Ireland)

## **DIRECTORY OF SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS**

## Support Organisations

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### WOMEN

#### Northern Ireland Women's Rural Network (NIRWN)

**Address:** Unit 13A, Ballysaggart Business Complex, 8 Beechvalley Way, Dungannon, Co. Tyrone

**Postcode:** BT70 1BS

**Email:** [majella@nirwn.org](mailto:majella@nirwn.org)

**Telephone:** 028 8775 3389

**Website Address:** <http://www.nirwn.org/>

#### Women's Aid NI

**Freephone Helpline:** 0808 802 1414

The helpline is available 24 hours and open to all women and men affected by domestic and sexual violence

**Address:** Women's Aid Federation NI, 129 University Street, Belfast

**Postcode:** BT7 1HP

**Email:** [info@womensaidni.org](mailto:info@womensaidni.org)

**Telephone:** 028 9024 9041

**Website Address:** <https://www.womensaidni.org/>

#### Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)

**Address:** 6 Mount Charles, Belfast, Co. Antrim

**Postcode:** BT7 1NZ

**Email:** [info@wrda.net](mailto:info@wrda.net)

**Telephone:** 028 9023 0212

**Website Address:** <http://www.wrda.net>

**NI Women's European Platform (NIWEP)**

**Address:** 6 Mount Charles, Belfast

**Postcode:** BT7 1NZ

**Email:** [niwep@btconnect.com](mailto:niwep@btconnect.com)

**Telephone:** 07716122804

**Website Address:** <https://blog.niwep.org/>

**Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)**

**Address:** DiverseCity Community Partnership, 12-14 The Diamond, Derry-Londonderry, County Londonderry

**Postcode:** BT48 6HW

**Email:** [catherine@fwin.org.uk](mailto:catherine@fwin.org.uk)

**Telephone:** 028 7126 6291

**Website Address:** <http://www.fwin.org.uk/>

**Women's Centre Derry**

**Address:** Beibhinn House, 5 Guildhall Street, Derry, Co. Derry

**Postcode:** BT48 6BB

**Email:** [bridgemcpherson@womenscentre.co.uk](mailto:bridgemcpherson@womenscentre.co.uk)

**Telephone:** 028 7126 7672

**Website Address:** <http://www.thewomenscentre.co.uk/>

**Women's Support Network (WSN)**

**Address:** 109-113 Royal Avenue, Belfast, Co. Antrim

**Postcode:** BT1 1FF

**Email:** [director@wsn.org.uk](mailto:director@wsn.org.uk)

**Telephone:** 028 9023 6923

**Website Address:** <http://www.wsn.org.uk/>

**Training for Women Network (TWN)**

**Address:** Unit 10B, Weavers Court, Linfield Road, Belfast, Co. Antrim

**Postcode:** BT12 5GH

**Email:** [info@twnonline.com](mailto:info@twnonline.com)

**Telephone:** 028 9031 9888

**Website Address:** <http://www.twnonline.com/>

**First Steps Women's Centre**

**Address:** 21A William Street, Dungannon, Co. Tyrone

**Postcode:** BT 70 1DX

**Email:** [thewomenscentre@gmail.com](mailto:thewomenscentre@gmail.com)

**Telephone:** 028 8772 7648

**Website Address:** <http://www.firststepswomenscentre.org/>

**Chrysalis Women's Centre**

**Address:** 520-523 Burnside, Brownlow, Criagavon, Co. Armagh

**Postcode:** BT65 5DE

**Email:** [chrysaliscentre@btconnect.com](mailto:chrysaliscentre@btconnect.com)

**Telephone:** 028 3834 1846

**Website Address:** <http://www.chrysaliscentre.org/>

**Directory of Local Women's Groups & Networks**

<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/directory-resources>

## **RURAL**

### **Northern Ireland Women's Rural Network (NIRWN)**

**Address:** Unit 13A, Ballysaggart Business Complex, 8 Beechvalley Way, Dungannon, Co. Tyrone

**Postcode:** BT70 1BS

**Email:** [majella@nirwn.org](mailto:majella@nirwn.org)

**Telephone:** 028 8775 3389

**Website Address:** <http://www.nirwn.org/>

### **Rural Community Network (RCN)**

**Address:** 38a Oldtown Street, Cookstown, Co Tyrone

**Postcode:** BT80 8EF

**Email:** [info@ruralcommunitynetwork.org](mailto:info@ruralcommunitynetwork.org)

**Telephone:** 028 8676 6670

**Website Address:** <http://www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org/>

### **Rural Support**

**Address:** Rural Support, Estate Building, Loughry College, Cookstown

**Postcode:** BT80 9AA

**Email:** <mailto:info@ruralsupport.org.uk>

**Telephone:** 028 8676 0040

**Helpline:** 0845 606 7 607

The helpline is available 9am - 9pm, Monday - Friday (voicemail and support options available at all other times)

**Website Address:** <http://www.ruralsupport.org.uk>

### **Rural Development Council NI (RDC)**

**Address:** 17 Loy St, Cookstown

**Postcode:** BT80 8PZ

**Email:** [info@rdc.org](mailto:info@rdc.org)

**Telephone:** 028 8676 6980

**Website Address:** <http://www.rdc.org.uk>

### **Local Rural Support Networks (RSNs)**

Visit the webpage to find the contact details for the Rural Support Network for your area.

**Website Address:** <http://www.localruralsupportnetworks.org>

### **Rural Network NI (RNNI)**

**Address:** Network Support Unit, 17 Loy St, Cookstown

**Postcode:** BT80 8PZ

**Email:** [info@ruralnetworkni.org.uk](mailto:info@ruralnetworkni.org.uk)

**Telephone:** 028 8676 6980

**Website Address:** <http://www.ruralnetworkni.org.uk/>

### **OTHER**

#### **Local Councils**

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/local-councils-in-northern-ireland>

### **NICMA The Childminding Association**

**Address:** 16/18 Mill Street, Newtownards, Co. Down,

**Postcode:** BT23 4LU

**Email:** [info@nicma.org](mailto:info@nicma.org)

**Telephone:** 028 9181 1015

**Website Address:** <https://nicma.org/>

### **EMPLOYERS FOR CHILDCARE NI**

**Address:** Blaris Industrial Estate, 11 Altona Road, Lisburn

**Postcode:** BT27 5QB

**Email:** [hello@employersforchildcare.org](mailto:hello@employersforchildcare.org)

**Freephone:** 0800 028 3008

**Telephone:** 028 9267 8200

**Website Address:** <https://www.employersforchildcare.org/>

## **AGE NI**

**Address:** 3 Lower Crescent, Belfast, Northern Ireland, BT7 1NR

**Postcode:** BT7 1NR

**Telephone:** 0808 808 7575

**Website Address:** <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland/>

## **Rural Community Transport Partnerships**

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/rural-community-transport-partnerships>

## **Over 60/65 Smart Pass**

Application forms can be obtained in the following ways:

- in person from any manned Translink bus or rail station
- by telephoning 0845 600 0049 (deaf and hard-of-hearing applicants can use the textphone number 028 9038 7505)
- by emailing: [smartpass@translink.co.uk](mailto:smartpass@translink.co.uk)

## **Citizens Advice NI**

**Address:** 46 Donegall Pass, Belfast,

**Postcode:** BT7 1BS

**Email:** [info@citizensadvice.co.uk](mailto:info@citizensadvice.co.uk)

**Telephone:** 028 9023 1120

**Website Address:** <https://www.citizensadvice.co.uk/>

## **Advice NI**

**Address:** 1 Rushfield Avenue, Belfast

**Postcode:** BT7 3FP

**Email:** [info@adviceni.net](mailto:info@adviceni.net)

**Telephone:** 028 9064 5919

**Website Address:** <https://www.adviceni.net/>

**Advice Line: Independent Welfare Changes advice**

**Freephone:** 0808 802 0020



**AWARE NI**

**Address:** 40-44 Duncairn Gardens, Belfast

**Postcode:** BT15 2GG

**Tel:** 028 9035 7820

**Email:** [info@aware-ni.org](mailto:info@aware-ni.org)

**Website Address:** <https://www.aware-ni.org/>

**AWARE NI**

**Address:** Equality House, 7-9 Shaftesbury Square, Belfast

**Postcode:** BT2 7DP

**Tel:** 028 90 500 600

**Email:** [information@equalityni.org](mailto:information@equalityni.org)

**Website Address:** <http://www.equalityni.org/Home>

**DISABILITY ACTION**

**Address:** Portside Business Park, 189 Airport Road West, Belfast

**Postcode:** BT3 9ED

**Tel:** 028 9029 7880

**Textphone:** 028 9029 7882

**Email:** [hq@disabilityaction.org](mailto:hq@disabilityaction.org)

**Website Address:** <http://www.disabilityaction.org/>

**CARERS NI**

**Address:** 58 Howard St, Belfast

**Postcode:** BT1 6PJ

**Tel:** 028 9043 9843

**Website Address:** <https://www.carersuk.org/northernireland/news-ni>

Government Departments

<https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/topics/your-executive/government-departments>