

## **Evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee**

### ***New Decade, New Approach Agreement Inquiry***

#### **1. Introduction**

This response has been submitted by the **Women's Support Network** (WSN) in Northern Ireland. The Women's Support Network welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee New Decade, New Approach Agreement inquiry.

Established in 1989 and based in Belfast, WSN is a regional organisation that works across all areas of Northern Ireland. It includes in its membership community-based women's centres, groups and organisations, with a concentration in disadvantaged areas. WSN is a charitable and feminist organisation, which adopts a community development approach.

Our **vision** is of a just and peaceful society devoid of gender discrimination, gender-based violence and women's rights violations, in which women from all backgrounds and communities can experience full equality of opportunity and participation across all spheres of their everyday lives, including: employment, education and training, public and political life, health and the home.

Our **mission** is to advance women's equality and rights by working to influence policy, practice and provision while also regionally supporting and representing the interests, needs and perspectives of women, particularly those in disadvantaged areas.

Women's centres and groups across Northern Ireland provide wrap-a-round services that support not only the woman but the whole family. They are trusted local organisations, mainly in disadvantaged areas, that women and

families are more likely to turn to or accept being referred to for support and advice at times of stress and difficulty.

WSN makes this submission for and on behalf of its members advocating to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network aims to strengthen the collective voice of women's groups and to promote and develop networking opportunities, to enable collective action and to impact upon policy and decision-making processes.

## **2. General Comments**

WSN welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the inquiry, however given the current Covid-19 pandemic and the impact this is having/will have in terms of government priorities, budgets and timeframes it is difficult to ascertain exactly how the NDNA Deal/Agreement will be delivered as detailed in the published document.

The Executive is rightly prioritising meeting the present and future needs of everyone living in Northern Ireland due to Covid-19 and the fallout from it and although Assembly business continues the timeframe for the implementation of initiatives outlined in the NDNA Deal are no longer a priority.

We propose that given the unavoidable delays in the Executive bringing forward a number of outline plans and timeframes that should have been in place by April 2020, this inquiry should have been delayed as gathering information and evidence to inform the inquiry on the following six specific questions is difficult at this time;

- whether the UK Government's commitment of £2 billion is sufficient to transform public service provision in Northern Ireland;
- what evidence and calculations underpin the £2 billion commitment;
- how UK Government funding should be allocated to Northern Ireland and whether it should be linked to the functioning of devolved institutions in Northern Ireland;

- the potential merits and/or demerits of establishing an Independent Fiscal Council in Northern Ireland to assess the Executive's use of public money;
- the potential effect of the New Decade, New Approach agreement on the future sustainability of devolved institutions in Northern Ireland; and
- whether the deal excludes other measures that might improve good governance in Northern Ireland.

However, given the current circumstances and the information available at present this submission will address a number of cross-cutting key points/themes that impact implementation of the NDNA Deal.

### **3. Key Issues/Themes -**

#### **3.1 Gender**

We welcome the commitment of the NDNA Deal to introduce a number of supporting strategies to underpin the Programme for Government that impact on women, including the 'Gender Strategy' however this is the only mention of gender or women in the NDNA document. In 2020, gender inequalities continue to permeate all aspects of Northern Ireland society and research has shown that women have been impacted most by ongoing austerity and this will be further compounded by the current and future impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite this, gender-neutral policy making is still the standard in all budgetary, policy and legislative decision making. It is essential that gender equality is embedded at the core of all levels of government and decision making in Northern Ireland.

Gender inequalities impact all aspects of women's lives including; employment, austerity and poverty including the 'Gender Pay Gap', childcare and caring responsibilities, access to training and education, access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, domestic and sexual violence, decision making and politics.

Women represent 82% of all part time workers and only 30% are self-employed and having one or more children reduces women's likelihood of being in a permanent full time job by almost one third, with only 45% of women with dependent children working in a permanent full time job. It is estimated that austerity since 2010 will have cost women a total of £79bn, against £13bn for men. It shows that, by 2020, men will have borne just 14% of the total burden of welfare cuts, compared with 86% for women. By the age of 42, mothers who are in full-time work earn 11% less than full-time women without children.

Women are more likely than men to be forced out of the labour market by unpaid, domestic work or caring responsibilities; 69% of carers in Northern Ireland are women.

Hunger and foodbank use disproportionately impacts women, as women are twice as likely to be food insecure as men and single mothers make up a third of all food bank users. In Northern Ireland, the group with the highest poverty throughout the last decade and worst impacted by welfare reform have been lone parents; of which 91% are women.

Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK without a government-funded Childcare Provision. Lone parents and families with a disabled child are less likely to be able to afford formal childcare and face further barriers to employment<sup>11</sup>

In 2018-19 the PSNI recorded 31,682 domestic abuse incidents, this increased 10% on the previous year and is the highest level in 15 years. There were 16,182 recorded domestic abuse crimes and on average the PSNI responded to a domestic abuse incident every 17 minutes, while domestic abuse accounted for 16% of all crime. In the same period the PSNI recorded 2,423 sexual offences and 1,023 reports of rape<sup>13</sup>. Northern Ireland was identified as having the joint highest levels of femicide in Europe in 2017, with 8 women murdered in a homicide with a domestic motivation. In 2018-19 the PSNI recorded 4 murders with a domestic motivation, all of those murdered were women.

The NDNA Deal commits to deliver a number of equality based strategies that relate to women's rights on childcare; anti-poverty; gender; disability and sexual orientation in addition to other that will impact on women. We also welcome the additional commitments to address the Gillen Review<sup>32</sup>, to increase funded cycles of IVF treatment, and to extend Welfare Reform mitigations beyond March 2020. However, for strategies to be developed, implemented and monitored they need to be resourced adequately, this detail is omitted from the document.

If gender inequalities are to be addressed across all aspects of the new Programme for Government a gendered lens need to applied to budget allocations for all initiatives and strategies initiated.

We welcome the introduction of reformed measures to put civic engagement and public consultation at the heart of policy making including the stakeholder engagement process to inform the development of a new strategic level outcomes based the Programme for Government and the co-design process to develop the underpinning strategies. However, we do caution on 'stakeholder and consultation response apathy', our members have informed of us of how little confidence they have, that having taken time to input into consultation after consultation, no changes were ever made to the initial proposals.

There will be additional civic society engagement through the Compact Civic Advisory Panel and additional input to committees and the ad hoc committee to consider the creation of a 'Bill of Rights'. We would advocate that on all these engagement fronts a gender balance is applied, this should include all committees, panels and independent panellists.

## **Covid-19**

After the NDNA Deal had been signed it quickly became apparent that the specifics of the budget to implement the initiatives detailed in the document had not been agreed in any depth between the Northern Ireland parties and

the UK Government. The announcement of £2 billion to support the restored institutions was deemed significantly insufficient and this was compounded further when it was realised that £1 billion of that money would have stemmed from the 'Barnett-based investment' anyway and the remaining amount was conditional and intended for specific purposes only.

The financial limitations expressed pre-Covid-19 meant that funding needed to be prioritised and that elements of the NDNA Deal would not be met/implemented in the short-to-medium term which in itself would lead to difficult discussions and decisions. However in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic prioritisation of elements of the NDNA that will be brought forward will be even more difficult for the newly formed Executive particularly in light of the additional impact of the 'fall-out' of this medical crisis.

Covid-19 is bringing unprecedented challenges across the UK and indeed the world and put in sharp focus the value and importance of care work, paid and unpaid, and highlighted the essential nature of often almost always low paid essential work including cleaners, catering staff and then the precarious nature of those in the retail sector. Women undertake the majority of this work, and women will bear a particular brunt of this crisis; economically, socially and in terms of health. We advocate that the Executive ensure a gender-sensitive crisis response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Incidents of domestic violence were first reported in China and now Northern Ireland is experiencing the same impact following continued 'lockdown'. The number of domestic homicides are also expected to increase.

Economically, women are overrepresented within the hospitality and leisure sectors, and are therefore disproportionately affected by this economic crisis. Many are also extremely vulnerable if they do get ill; 70% of jobs earning under the £118/week limit for Statutory Sick Pay are undertaken by women. Self-employed women also tend to run businesses with very tight margins, and many have limited savings to fall back on. This increases the risk of poverty and debt, and increases the reliance on high cost lenders, with associated long-term financial impacts. The risk is greatest for single parents, who already are more likely than other groups to experience poverty and debt.

The Job Retention Scheme and recent amendments to Universal Credit and other benefits provide a degree of support for some women, but a longer-term plan is required to ensure all women affected by job losses can provide for themselves and their families both now and in the recovery phase.

Women constitute over 70% of health and social care staff, with a significant proportion from BAME backgrounds. For many this involves a double burden, as women also shoulder the lion's share of unpaid care work. This puts women at increased risk of infection, as well as spreading infection to vulnerable family members. Many women will be expected to take on additional care commitments as the epidemic in Northern Ireland escalates, potentially putting themselves and those they care for at risk.

In addition, as women make up 70% of health and social care staff, 85% of part time workers and the vast majority of those **in low-paid, insecure work**, many will not qualify for the already worryingly low **Statutory Sick Pay** rate of £94.25 per week. According to the UK Women's Budget Group, women make up 70% of those in jobs ineligible for SSP across the UK as they earn less than £118 per week. Low-income workers should be eligible for SSP and the rate of SSP should be increased to £322.64 per week.

Recently published research from the Women's Regional Consortium in Northern Ireland shows that fewer adults in NI have a savings account relative to the rest of the UK. 54% of adults in NI have either **no cash savings** or savings of less than £2,000. A greater proportion of people in NI also are considered vulnerable due to their financial circumstances and 56% have stated that they could cover their living expenses for less than a week if their household income was lost. Women are at great risk of needing to access **high-cost lending**, particularly doorstep lending and credit/store-card/catalogues.

Research from the Money Advice Service shows that debt impacts women more than men as out of the estimated 8.8 million people with **severe debt problems** nearly two-thirds (64%) are women. If adequate financial help and support is not available to those women who have lost their jobs, face reduced wages or struggle financially on current benefit levels, there will be undoubted increases in debt levels which will have a **long-term impact** on women.

**Single parents** are particularly vulnerable to debt, food insecurity and poverty, an issue that is striking as 91% of single parents in Northern Ireland are women.

evidence highlights a range of urgent needs in the acute and recovery phase of the crisis. However, the Women's Policy Group is also hopeful that long term, gender equality can be strengthened through actions put in place to address the specific gendered impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. This is of particular importance when implementing any policies to mitigate against the impact of the resulting and inevitable economic downfall as a result of COVID-19. We do not wish to see the situation repeated following the financial crash in 2008 which resulted in austerity measures that disproportionately impacted on women.

#### Final Remarks

The Executive need to take a gendered approach to implementation of the NDNA Deal, take into consideration the total impact both austerity and Covid-19 have had on women. We need to see gender balance on communities, panels and forums and all elements of government should be funded used a gendered lens.

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