

Submission by Northern Ireland Women's European Platform to Unequal Impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact by the Women and Equalities Committee

July 2020

1. Introduction

This submission is an update to a submission made previously in April, in response to the main inquiry. It will focus on the current position, which is based on the original position taken at the early stage of the crisis also summarised below.

What seemed evident in the early stages of the crisis is now apparent: women are heavily and uniquely affected not only by the virus itself, but the impacts of lockdown and the economic crisis societies the world over are now facing. Women provide the vast majority of paid and unpaid care, and have shouldered additional care responsibilities in lockdown, including home schooling. Women are also overrepresented in frontline and low pay sectors, which have been the hardest hit in the crisis. During lockdown, domestic and gender based violence has also increased, emphasising the dangers women and girls face at home. NIWEP welcomes the Committee's initiative in taking this Inquiry, and welcomes the opportunity to share further evidence. It is clear that women will pay the price for COVID-19, unless urgent and decisive action is taken with women across the UK to ensure gender and equality are at the forefront of recovery.

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (hereafter NIWEP) is a membership organisation working to ensure the voice of women in Northern Ireland is heard at the national and international level. We work with our members and partners to collate the views and evidence of women, and represent Northern Ireland at the UN as well as at the European Women's Lobby. Our core role is to coordinate the response to international human rights processes, in particular CEDAW. At the local level, our work focuses on sharing information and building capacity on international human rights instruments and mechanisms for gender equality, in order to support advocacy for gender equality. We also work with policy makers to inform gender responsive policy making.

During the COVID-19 crisis, a specific role of NIWEP has been to share information, evidence and examples of a gender responsive approach to COVID-19, to support and inform a domestic response and highlight the experience in Northern Ireland. NIWEP has contributed to the development of a feminist recovery plan for Northern Ireland, which sets out a series of recommendations from the women's sector in Northern Ireland for both the Northern Ireland and UK governments. This response endorses the feminist recovery plan¹ and is made in light of the above context.

Summary: Key messages

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic crisis affect men and women differently. Fundamentally, the crisis is highlighting and deepening existing structural inequalities, and urgent action is needed to ensure women's rights and gender equality are not rolled back further. These inequalities have been highlighted in the [Concluding](#)

¹ Women's Policy Group (July 2020) [COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan](#)

[Observations from the CEDAW Committee](#)² in its examination of the UK in 2019, the recommendations of which remain relevant as a roadmap to recovery. The Concluding Observations particularly highlighted the fragile position in the UK in relation to social protection, addressing gender based violence and reproductive rights in Northern Ireland. The Concluding Observations also highlighted the critical importance of a gender sensitive approach to policy making.³ Implementing all of these recommendations is critical in the context of COVID-19 recovery, and will also contribute to ensuring the UK meets its international obligations and can lead with example on the international stage.

NIWEP is recommending the following key actions to ensure gender equality is not rolled back but secured as a result of COVID-19 recovery:

1. Macroeconomic reform: Invest in care and create a care economy

- Increasing apprenticeships in care
- Improving pay and working conditions in the care sector
- Supporting the childcare sector, with a view to creating a universal childcare system

2. Social protection: Ensure economic independence for everyone

- Ensure social protection for everyone, including access to Statutory Sick Pay without income thresholds and including self employed people
- Review Universal Credit and remove two child cap
 - At minimum, ensure welfare payments reflect the true cost of living, to ensure the wellbeing of women and families and reduce the risk of exploitation such as 'sex for rent'
- Introduce flexibility in Universal Credit and other key benefits to take account of challenging labour market situation
- Review no recourse to public funds in line with judgement from the Divisional Court of the Queen's Bench Division in May 2020⁴
 - At a minimum, ensure women with no recourse to public funds can access protection and support, specifically protection from violence, regardless of residency status and without fear of sanction

3. Institutional mechanisms: Ensure women are represented in decision making and policy development

- Develop institutional mechanisms for gender equality and aim for parity in decision making
 - Ensure women are represented on all COVID-19 recovery taskforces and advisory groups, with meaningful engagement with women's civil society
- Ensure evidence based decision making, using available tools to support decision making

² CEDAW (2019) [Concluding Observations on the eighth periodic report of the United Kingdom](#)

³ CEDAW Committee (2019) [Concluding Observations on the 8th periodic report of the United Kingdom](#)

⁴ R (W , a child) v Secretary of State for the Home Department, [EWHC 1299/2020](#). The ruling holds that the 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) is unlawful. Specifically, it states that the NRPF condition must be lifted if an individual is at imminent risk of becoming destitute. It also requires the Home Office to develop a new instruction to case workers within seven days.

- Gender budgeting provides a concrete framework for monitoring and analysis of budget impacts on women and men, supporting effective budgeting
 - Equality impact assessment should be integrated into policy making from the earliest stages to ensure equitable, effective and efficient distribution of resources
 - Build capacity for the effective implementation of the Section 75 duties⁵
- Strengthen a focus on human rights based wellbeing in economic decision making, to complement and address the limitations of GDP
 - Develop a dashboard of gender disaggregated data broken down by age, race and disability on critical indicators, linked to the SDGs

2. Economic impacts of coronavirus on women

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on the entire population of the UK. In Northern Ireland, the economy was 25% smaller in April compared to February, and the economic forecast for Northern Ireland is that the economy will shrink by at least 7.5% in 2020, with economic output falling almost 13%.⁶ Men as well as women have lost their jobs or been furloughed, and many are uncertain if their jobs are safe in the recovery period. There are, however, key gender based differences. Most significantly, the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic are female dominated, while women also have greater unpaid caring responsibilities than men.

The benefit system does not recognise the gender differences in economic activity and labour market participation. Specifically, there is limited consideration of women's role in caring, which creates additional pressures as women are forced to balance conflicting commitments. Women therefore face additional challenges in securing the wellbeing of themselves and their families where they are forced to rely on benefits⁷, and research by the Women's Regional Consortium with women in Northern Ireland shows that many experience high levels of debt and associated stress and poor mental health as a result of persistent insufficient income.⁸ The gendered economic impacts of the pandemic reflect existing structural and social inequalities between men and women, which are based on valuing men's and women's work differently, and prioritising women's role as carers and supporters of men's work.

2.1 Impact on macro economic structural issues

The value and importance of care has been highlighted in an unprecedented way during the pandemic. However, behind the banners, warm words and weekly clapping, the pandemic has had a very real and specific impact on women. Over 70% of the healthcare workforce is female, and the risk to frontline staff caring for coronavirus patients remains concrete. The issues have been repeatedly highlighted and do not need to be rehearsed, but include lack of access to adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as well as low pay and difficult working conditions including zero hours contracts and precarious work with short term

⁵ ECNI (2018) [Acting On the Evidence of Public Authorities' Practice Summary Report](#)

⁶ Department of the Economy (July 2020) [COVID-19 and the Northern Ireland economy](#)

⁷ Women's Regional Consortium (2019) [Impact of ongoing austerity: Women's perspectives](#)

⁸ Women's Regional Consortium (February 2020) [Making ends meet: Women's perspectives on access to lending](#)

contracts, particularly for staff in care homes and in domiciliary care.⁹ The most significant impact, however, has been on unpaid care, which is predominantly provided by women.

2.1.1 Care

It is notable and highlights the structural gender inequalities that childcare and adult social care have not been addressed as part of easing of lockdown, as has been noted by the Fawcett Society¹⁰ and the Women's Budget Group¹¹, among others. The concrete impact of this is that many people are unable to return to work, as they are unable to access care for children or other dependents. This brings risks of redundancy, and longer term the socioeconomic wellbeing of both affected carers and their families.

A recent study involving France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States found that working women on average do 15 hours more a week of unpaid care and domestic work compared to men¹². This highlights how and why women are more likely to face hardship as a result of gaps in care provision, as women have taken the main responsibility for additional care required during lockdown. For example a survey by Cambridge INET shows that women have undertaken two additional hours of childcare and two hours less paid work per day during lockdown, compared to men.¹³ The differential is confirmed in other surveys, including a survey by the Institute for Fiscal Studies. This survey also shows that even in two parent households where both parents have continued working, it is usually women whose work is disrupted by caring¹⁴. The emotional labour involved in this is taking a toll on women's mental wellbeing in particular. However, it is instructive that men are more likely to report additional caring has had a negative impact on their work.¹⁵

Anecdotal evidence, including survey evidence collected and published (anonymously) by Engender¹⁶, highlights that while many employers have been flexible, others have not. Many women have been forced to work longer days to meet their contracted hours around caring responsibilities; many workplaces have also been busier than normal as a result of the crisis. Women are more likely to report that their employer has demanded them to continue turning up at work, or face redundancy. It is essential to address this lack of flexibility in the workplace, which disproportionately affects women, particularly as emerging evidence emphasises that flexible working practices increase employee productivity and also their loyalty.¹⁷

It can be noted that several recent surveys indicate parents – men and women – are expressing a preference for more flexible working in the future, as lockdown arrangements have enabled better balancing of work and family commitments.¹⁸ However, parents equally report struggling with the additional demands of care, in particular home schooling. A survey by Parenting NI shows that 73% of parents surveyed in Northern Ireland have found lockdown a struggle for them personally, while 74% felt it had been a struggle for their

⁹ Women's Policy Group (March 2020) [Statement by the Women's Policy Group on the gendered impact of COVID-19](#)

¹⁰ Fawcett Society (July 2020) [Gendered impact of the UK Government's lifting of lockdown](#)

¹¹ de Henau J & Himmelweit, S (June 2020) [A care led recovery from coronavirus](#). London: Women's Budget Group

¹² Boston Consulting Group (21 May 2020.) ["Easing the COVID-19 burden on working parents"](#)

¹³ Fawcett Society (July 2020) [Gendered impact of the UK Government's lifting of lockdown](#)

¹⁴ Andrew et. al. (2020) 'How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?' [IFS Briefing Note BN290](#)

¹⁵ King's College and Ipsos MORI (June 2020) [The gender divide in childcare under lockdown](#)

¹⁶ Engender (2020) [COVID-19 and women's equality](#)

¹⁷ *The Observer* 28 June 2020 ['Only 13% of UK working parents want to go back to 'the old normal'](#)

¹⁸ *ibidem*

children.¹⁹ Another survey with parents in Northern Ireland by Stranmillis University College, part of Queen's University Belfast, emphasises the impact of lockdown on families with children with special needs, many of whom have struggled with no additional support at all during the lockdown.²⁰

This survey also highlights that single parents have faced major difficulties in supporting their children during lockdown, with lack of access to appropriate technology a key issue. Lack of reliable broadband services in rural areas has created similar difficulties for rural parents. The survey cites examples of families sharing one device for work and school, and mothers and teenagers trying to complete schoolwork on mobile phones.²¹ The mental and emotional health impact of this on mothers is significant, while children with limited access to technology are the most likely to face long term educational disadvantage. Work is currently being undertaken by the Women's Regional Consortium in Northern Ireland to quantify this and other impacts of the crisis on women in Northern Ireland.

2.1.2 Examples of initiatives elsewhere

Examples of action to address this are available internationally. For example, in Czechia parents of children under 13 can care for their children at home, with their salary covered by the government. The Netherlands has continued to support organisations providing services for women and girls affected by domestic violence. Staff in organisations addressing domestic violence have been classified as key workers, and are able to access childcare to continue providing the service. Schools have been given funding to provide laptops and other devices to support distance learning for children with special needs and/or vulnerable eg. due to domestic violence or child protection issues.²² In Ireland, provision has been made for most parents to take parental leave of up to 22 weeks to care for children under 18; however, this leave is unpaid.²³

2.1.3 Cost of care and future investment

The cost of care is in itself a pre-existing and significant issue for families, while the persistent low pay in the sector is a key gender equality issue, as well as a macroeconomic issue affecting safe and sustainable service provision. In Northern Ireland, there is no a childcare strategy, despite accessible and affordable childcare being one of the key recommendations from the CEDAW Concluding Observations 2019 for Northern Ireland, and a central recommendation for the UK as a whole in 2007, 2013 and 2019. Childcare is currently provided exclusively by the private sector, including private childminders, and is expensive for those accessing care, while staff in the sector remain low paid and undervalued.

The same applies to adult social care in care homes, as well as domiciliary care. Adult social care was identified by the public as the social policy area of concern for a Citizen's Assembly, which highlights the level of concern over a significant period of time.²⁴ While both sectors have faced major difficulties during the crisis, fees have been charged by care

¹⁹ Parenting NI (May 2020) [Parenting in a pandemic survey findings](#)

²⁰ Purdy, N blog (10 June 2020) ['Bridging the lockdown learning gap'](#)

²¹ ibidem

²² European Women's Lobby (April 2020) [Women must not pay the price for COVID-19!](#)

²³ Irish government press release <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/70be56-government-action-plan-for-communityresponse-to-covid-19/> 16

²⁴ Citizen's Assembly for Northern Ireland (2019) [Recommendations for reforming social care for older people from the first Citizen's Assembly for Northern Ireland](#)

providers including some childcare establishments, adding a further burden to families faced with redundancies, furlough and reduced hours. It is essential that the opportunity is taken to address care as part of recovery. This is developed further below in the section on relevant measures, but it should be emphasised that a care economy is an investment in gender equality, a green economy and sustainable job creation. Therefore, it should be a central element of COVID-19 recovery, as well as development of new models in a post Brexit arrangement.

2.2 Impacts on employment

Lack of gender disaggregated data is creating difficulties in establishing a detailed picture of the gender differences in job losses to date, access to furlough and predicted job losses in the recovery phase. However, as a broad indication, a UK wide survey with 2,000 working age adults by Turn2Us, a charity working to tackle poverty, has also highlighted an increase in the gender pay gap. Women report an expected loss of income of £309 (26%) per month due to the pandemic, while the expected drop in men's income in this survey was £247 (18%) per month.²⁵

Available data in Northern Ireland show that 211,700 individuals or almost 30% of the workforce in Northern Ireland were furloughed through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) as of 31 May, and a report by the Department of the Economy published at the start of July confirms that the sectors hardest hit by the crisis include hospitality, tourism and retail. All of these sectors are predominantly staffed by women; however, while the report by the Department includes some age based analysis, there is no gender analysis. Figures published by the Department show that accommodation and food service activities was the most affected sector, with output reducing by almost 92%. Output in arts, entertainment and recreation (-47%), education (-43.2%), and other services (-51.6%) also fell dramatically. In comparison, male dominated sectors saw more limited falls in output, including a fall of 43.5 per cent in construction and a fall of 38 per cent in transport and storage (-38.3%), compared to February 2020²⁶.

It is likely that these sectors will face longer term challenges, particularly where social distancing requires reductions in capacity, and therefore there will be a long term impact on staffing and indeed the structure of the future labour market. The Department of the Economy report highlights a survey by Tourism NI, in which 63% of responding businesses expected a severe long term impact.²⁷

Internationally, the International Monetary Fund is advising rolling back financial support to sectors 'likely to emerge smaller' from the crisis²⁸, which further indicates likely changes to global economic structures. This highlights the need for gender analysis of the economic impacts, and active development of interventions that support a gender balanced and gender responsive future economy.

2.3 Impact on social protection

²⁵ Turn2Us press release 4 May 2020: [Coronavirus widens the gender pay gap](#)

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 12.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 15

²⁸ IMF (24 June 2020) [World Economic Outlook Update June 2020: A crisis like no other, an uncertain recovery](#), p.1

In Northern Ireland, the Universal Credit claimant count almost doubled between March and May, from 70,000 to 134,000 individuals²⁹. Currently available data show that the female claimant count increased by 92%, while the male claimant count increased by 136%³⁰. However, as couples must claim Universal Credit jointly, the full gender picture is not immediately clear. What is evident is that there are large numbers of households experiencing a significant drop in income, with the associated challenges ranging from difficulties in covering childcare costs to meeting mortgage payments and feeding children.

2.3.1 Debt and violence

Even before the pandemic, the women's sector was highlighting that women on low incomes are at significant risk of abuse and exploitation, including 'sex for rent'³¹.

Illegal lending, which many women on the lowest incomes use as a last resort, is particularly associated with intimidation and violence³². Anecdotally, it is reported that illegal lenders force women to engage in prostitution as a means of repayment. Illegal lenders may also threaten family members, as a powerful mechanism to ensure compliance. In Northern Ireland, control by paramilitary groups in some communities involves lending and remains an issue, although it is extremely difficult to obtain formal evidence on this.

It is likely the crisis will worsen this kind of gender based violence. Asylum seeking women, refugee women, homeless women and women with insecure immigration status are at greatest risk³³, but the intersection of gender and low income creates major challenges that must be addressed to avoid pushing back the rights of low income and minority women as a result of the crisis.

2.3.2 Household budgeting and gender

Existing research shows that household budgeting is women's responsibility³⁴, and it is therefore without doubt that women will have faced the most significant impact of a sudden drop in income. The five week wait for a first payment is onerous at all times, but during lockdown, challenges for families have been exacerbated, particularly as job losses for many were unexpected and therefore families were unprepared financially as well as practically. The impact has been particularly severe for lone parent households, over 80% of which are headed by women and which are already at the highest risk of persistent poverty. A recent survey by Turn2Us indicates that over 40% of surveyed single parents expect to live on less than £500 per month in the wake of the pandemic, with income affected by issues such as stopped child maintenance payments and increased costs, as well as losses in wages and salaries.³⁵

For those on the lowest incomes, the extension of schemes such as free school meal assistance over the summer do provide a degree of support, and it is important that claiming

²⁹ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (July 2020) [Management information related to Universal Credit Claims, Payments and Advances](#)

³⁰ Department of the Economy (July 2020) [COVID-19 and the Northern Ireland economy](#)

³¹ Engender, NIWEP, WEN Wales and Women's Resource Centre (January 2019) [CEDAW: Shadow report from the four nations of the UK](#)

³² Women's Regional Consortium (February 2020) [Making ends meet: Women's perspectives on access to lending](#)

³³ Engender, NIWEP, WEN Wales and Women's Resource Centre (January 2019) [CEDAW: Shadow report from the four nations of the UK](#)

³⁴ Fawcett Society (July 2020) [Hers and his: opening up the household budget](#)

³⁵ Turn2Us press release 4 May 2020: [Coronavirus widens the gender pay gap](#)

such support is as streamlined as possible. In Northern Ireland, this will be paid directly into claimants' accounts³⁶, providing some autonomy and flexibility for families in how needs are met (although with potential challenges for families with specific difficulties in managing cash). It is important to note, however, that many families struggle to meet the needs of children in their new circumstances, and ongoing financial support will be important alongside an economic recovery that encourages sustainable job creation. In this regard, enabling labour market participation for women creates multiple benefits, as reductions in maternal poverty are closely associated with reductions in child poverty, with its long term impacts on children's life opportunities.³⁷ Women are also more likely to spend any increase in disposable income locally, contributing effectively to sustainable local economies.

It is important that the medium to long term changes in the economy are taken into account in the operation of the welfare system. In particular, this applies to the conditionality in Universal Credit, as job opportunities will be limited in sectors often regarded as entry points to the labour market, and claimants will need both time and support to upskill or reskill for new job opportunities emerging. It can be noted that IMF recommends maintaining support to individuals and households affected by COVID-19 during recovery, primarily as a means to stimulate demand and stabilise the economy as a whole³⁸.

2.3.3 Furlough - Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) – or furlough – has provided a degree of security for many employees, female and male, and it has been highlighted internationally as an example of good practice by the UN and IMF³⁹, among others.

While no research specific to Northern Ireland is available at the time of writing, anecdotally there is evidence that the scheme has enabled women and families to manage their finances, particularly in a context where some childcare providers have continued to charge fees. This has played some part in managing stress, and in some families furlough has enabled parents to focus on home schooling and additional family time, with positive impacts on family wellbeing. However, it is evident that longer term uncertainty is limiting the benefits of furlough, and women are significantly affected as predicted job losses are concentrated in female dominated sectors.

A key element of feminist economics is viewing education as an investment, rather than an expenditure as it is currently identified in GDP calculations.^{40,41} Options to continue supporting people affected by furlough, including people who face redundancy as the scheme comes to an end, through support for education could effectively contribute to economic recovery, while preventing mass unemployment as currently predicted. A key function would be upskilling people to take on new jobs in a green economy, which would both support sustainable job creation and help ensure the UK is well positioned globally, thus helping stabilise the economy long term. This would also be in line with

³⁶ BBC Northern Ireland 19 June 2020 '[Coronavirus: Executive agrees to extend the free school meals scheme](#)'

³⁷ de Henau J & Himmelweit, S (June 2020) [A care led recovery from coronavirus](#). London: Women's Budget Group

³⁸ IMF (24 June 2020) [World Economic Outlook Update June 2020: A crisis like no other, an uncertain recovery](#)

³⁹ International Monetary Fund (June 2020) [Are macro and credit policies enough?](#)

⁴⁰ European Women's Lobby (March 2020) [The Purple Pact](#)

⁴¹ Engender and Close the Gap (June 2020) [Gender and economic recovery](#)

recommendations by the IMF as well as the UN to ‘build back better’, while protecting the most vulnerable individuals.⁴²

With regard to investing in education, a standard model for social care work could be an effective economic stimulus as well as a short term priority to strengthen health and care services. This would involve investing in apprenticeships in care, which are currently significantly underfunded for example in comparison to apprenticeships in construction.⁴³

2.3.4 Gaps in CJRS

The design of the CJRS has meant that some of the lowest paid and most vulnerable workers have fallen outside its scope, primarily due to the focus on qualifying earnings in the scheme. People in seasonal jobs and on short term contracts or in freelance work, have been ineligible, often leaving affected individuals and households in financial hardship. This has recently been highlighted by the Treasury Select Committee, which has urged for action to address gaps.⁴⁴ While there is no gender breakdown in this regard, it should be noted that women who choose freelancing often do so as a way of balancing work and family commitments, which highlights the wider implications of being unable to access financial support during the pandemic. Short term contracts are also common in many female dominated sectors, including in the lower paid grades of media and advertising. This affects in particular young women, in ways similar to the impact on gig economy workers. Many female dominated sectors also use zero hours contracts extensively, and this further highlights the issues associated with zero hours contracts.

A specific issue in the design of CJRS affected pregnant women on low pay, in that being furloughed on 80% of their regular income resulted in their income falling below the threshold for Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP). Women in this group were advised to claim for Maternity Allowance as an alternative. However, this allowance is lower than SMP, and the process to claim is complex, while Maternity Allowance also counts against other benefits in a way that SMP does not. There is anecdotal evidence that some women therefore chose to start their maternity leave up to three months early, with follow on impacts on maternity leave after the baby is born. This was highlighted in Northern Ireland by the Women’s Policy Group and Northern Ireland Women’s Budget Group, which wrote to the Minister for the Economy to seek redress for women⁴⁵. As a result, the policy in Northern Ireland was amended in late April, to ensure pregnant women employed before April 2020 and furloughed due to coronavirus are eligible for SMP.⁴⁶

2.3.5 Self employed women

While women in employment have had a degree of security through the CJRS, self employed women have found it more challenging to access financial support during

⁴² IMF (24 June 2020) [World Economic Outlook Update June 2020: A crisis like no other, an uncertain recovery](#)

⁴³ Professor Ann Marie Gray, Ulster University; see eg. NIWEP (June 2020) Summary paper, webinar on [Caring for the future](#)

⁴⁴ Treasury Select Committee (June 2020) [Economic impact of coronavirus](#)

⁴⁵ [Letter](#) from Women’s Resource and Development Agency on behalf of WPG and NIWBG to Minister for Communities 9 April 2020

⁴⁶ Department of the Economy press release 24 April 2020 [Ministers announce protection of family-related statutory payments for furloughed workers](#)

lockdown. Currently available data show that 69,000 out of 96,000 eligible self employed individuals in Northern Ireland have made a claim through the Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS)⁴⁷, but again no gender breakdown is available.

Anecdotally, there is evidence that self employed women across the UK have found it difficult to claim or been ineligible for the scheme, for a range of reasons including low turnover and a business newly established. The recent Treasury Select Committee inquiry further shows that many self employed people have been unable to access Universal Credit, as their savings exceed the threshold⁴⁸.

This further underlines the importance of data broken down by gender, as well as development of support suitable for different types of self employment. The International Monetary Fund notes that it is important to support solvent businesses that have a liquidity problem, as it estimates that these businesses will return to being profitable as the immediate crisis subsides⁴⁹. Therefore, it is with concern that NIWEP notes the Chancellor's plan to discontinue support to self employed people.⁵⁰

In Italy, the Cura Italia economic package includes parental leave of up to 15 days paid at 50% of salary, for parents of children under 12 or children with disabilities of any age. The scheme is designed for employees in the private sector and self employed people, and the days are to be used between both parents (where relevant). Separate provision is being made for public sector workers. Parents can also request a set number of days' paid leave in each month or babysitter vouchers worth up to €600. The package also includes a €5 million ring fenced element for female entrepreneurship in a fund for small and medium enterprises (SMEs).⁵¹

3. Measures for economic recovery and gender equality

The Chancellor's summer statement includes proposals for a temporary job creation scheme for under-25s, but also confirms CJRS and SEISS will be discontinued⁵². This is, notably, a departure from advice and guidance provided by international agencies such as IMF and the World Bank, which emphasise that social protection and longer term support is an investment in economic stimulus, and a vital safety net that should be retained.⁵³ While the job creation proposal in the Chancellor's summer statement is positive in principle, a more promising approach would be an evidence based analysis of overall benefits of different measures to society and a long term approach, as opposed to short term measures. This would enable effective action to safeguard and strengthen gender equality, while also 'building back better' and putting the UK on a strong footing for future economic success and innovation both domestically and internationally.

Building on the discussion above, NIWEP would highlight and urge for three key interventions to form part of a green, gender responsive recovery. These interventions are supported by strong evidence and will not only strengthen gender equality, but also

⁴⁷ Department of the Economy (July 2020) [COVID-19 and the Northern Ireland economy](#)

⁴⁸ Treasury Select Committee (June 2020) [Economic impact of coronavirus](#)

⁴⁹ International Monetary Fund (June 2020) [Are macro and credit policies enough?](#)

⁵⁰ *The Guardian* 8 July 2020 '[Summer statement: Rishi Sunak plans temporary job creation scheme for under-25s](#)'

⁵¹ European Women's Lobby (April 2020) [Women must not pay the price for COVID-19!](#)

⁵² *The Guardian* 8 July 2020 '[Summer statement: Rishi Sunak plans temporary job creation scheme for under-25s](#)'

⁵³ International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (May 2020) [Enhancing access to opportunities](#)

contribute to strengthening the labour market and future proofing the economy. The proposals reflect those in the CEDAW Committee Guidance note on COVID-19⁵⁴ as well as the Purple Pact⁵⁵, the European Women's Lobby's feminist approach to the economy, which emphasises that feminist economics strives for peace and wellbeing for all, on a healthy planet. NIWEP is the Northern Ireland coordination to the Lobby, which is the umbrella network for women's networks in Europe.

The CEDAW Committee guidance note on COVID 19 emphasises key areas for action to ensure women and girls are protected and gender equality safeguarded during the pandemic. These include providing socioeconomic support to women and girls, investing in continuous education and taking targeted action to support women and girls in disadvantaged groups. The guidance note emphasises the UN Sustainable Development Goals as the organising principle for action, which should be focused on leaving no one behind.⁵⁶ The CEDAW Committee has previously highlighted the close link between implementing CEDAW and achieving the SDGs⁵⁷, while a new guidance document by UN Women emphasises that the SDGs can and must inform a gender lens in recovery. This was also the core message of CEDAW Committee vice chair Nicole Ameline, who provided a keynote address at a conference on CEDAW organised by NIWEP in January 2020.

1. Macroeconomic reform: Invest in care and create a care economy

As outlined above, access to affordable, high quality care is central for gender equality, as it will enable women to make true, if ever constrained, choices in relation to care giving and employment. This, in turn, will help reduce poverty, including child poverty, and will also contribute to a sustainable economy by strengthening women's spending power and purchasing parity.⁵⁸ It is equally important for those receiving care, as has been highlighted throughout the COVID-19 crisis. A significant proportion of care recipients are women, as women tend to live longer than men, but this is primarily an issue of human rights and social justice. It is also an issue of investing in the future, as high quality childcare is essential for children's long term outcomes. This has been recognised by international financial actors, including IMF and the World Bank in an advice note to the G20 meeting in May, which recommends a green economic recovery with investment in care as a means to bolster female labour market participation (and through this economic recovery and tax receipts).⁵⁹ UN Women has published evidence and guidance on developing a care economy, and emphasises its importance in effective recovery.⁶⁰

Investment in care is also essential for ensuring that the UK can effectively prepare for an increasingly ageing population. As noted by the European Institute for Gender Equality, resilient and sustainable care systems will be essential in the context of ageing populations. In this context, investment in care with improved pay and conditions will be critical to ensure the sector can attract high skilled professionals of all genders.⁶¹ An immediate solution would

⁵⁴ CEDAW Committee (April 2020) [Call to Action and guidance note on COVID-19](#)

⁵⁵ European Women's Lobby (March 2020) [The Purple Pact](#)

⁵⁶ CEDAW Committee (April 2020) [Call to Action and guidance note on COVID-19](#)

⁵⁷ Azcona, G, A Bhatt et al (June 2020) [Spotlight on gender, COVID-19 and the SDGs: Will the pandemic derail hard-won progress on gender equality?](#)

⁵⁸ Engender and Close the Gap (June 2020) [Gender and economic recovery](#)

⁵⁹ International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (May 2020) [Enhancing access to opportunities](#)

⁶⁰ UN Women (June 2020) [COVID-19 and the care economy: Immediate action and structural transformation for a gender-responsive recovery](#)

⁶¹ European Institute for Gender Equality (June 2020) [Gender equality and long term care at home](#)

be investing in care apprenticeships, which would contribute to both offering high quality education and employment opportunities for women and girls, and addressing skills shortages in the sector.⁶²

New research for the Women's Budget Group by de Henau and Himmelweit⁶³ shows that investment in care, equating to 2.5% of GDP, would create two million jobs and increase employment by five percentage points, while reducing the gender employment gap by four percentage points. The job creation impact is 2.7 times that of investment in construction, creating 6.3 times as many jobs for women and 10% more for men. de Henau and Himmelweit also emphasise that 50% more of investment in care can be recouped in direct and indirect taxes, compared to investment in construction.⁶⁴

NIWEP would recommend the following key interventions as part of investment in care:

- Increasing apprenticeships in care
- Improving pay and working conditions in the care sector
- Supporting the childcare sector, with a view to creating a universal childcare system

All of the above will need to be supported and complemented by public debate and communications aimed at revaluing care and understanding care as a critical economic activity.

2. Social protection: Ensure economic safety net for everyone

This crisis has highlighted the value and importance of the welfare system, and the UK has led by example by introducing the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and relaxing conditions on Universal Credit. However, as outlined above gaps remain in provision and affect primarily women. A particular concern is women with no recourse to public funds, for whom challenges are multiplied, and who are at increased risk of violence, abuse and exploitation. This was highlighted in recommendations in the CEDAW Concluding Observations 2019.⁶⁵

The EWL Purple Pact emphasises that social protection is a cornerstone of a feminist, green and resilient economy based on a human rights framework. Social protection is particularly important for women, as women rely on benefit payments for a greater proportion of their income than men. This will be exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, as the hardest hit sectors are female dominated, and women will need economic support to enable reskilling, while securing the wellbeing of their families. To enable this, in a context of a contracting labour market⁶⁶, flexibility in the Universal Credit conditionality will be required for the short to medium term.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals reflect this, and UN agencies from the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) to the UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs (UN DESA) stress that achieving SDG 5 Gender Equality is critical to achieving the goals as a whole, particularly in the context of COVID-19 recovery. UNFPA identifies support for women and

⁶² Professor Ann Marie Gray, Ulster University; see eg. NIWEP (June 2020) Summary paper, webinar on [Caring for the future](#)

⁶³ de Henau J & de Himmelweit, S (June 2020) [A care led recovery from coronavirus](#). London: Women's Budget Group

⁶⁴ Ibidem, p.2.

⁶⁵ CEDAW Committee (2019) [Concluding Observations on the 8th periodic report of the United Kingdom](#)

⁶⁶ House of Commons Library (June 2020) [Coronavirus: Effect on the economy and public finances](#)

girls as the central priority in its global response plan to the pandemic, and emphasises access to sexual and reproductive health services alongside broader socioeconomic support.⁶⁷ UN DESA emphasises social protection for all⁶⁸, a call also repeated by the UN Secretary-General⁶⁹, UNICEF⁷⁰, IMF⁷¹ and UN Women⁷² as well as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights⁷³, among others.

NIWEP would recommend the following key interventions with regard to social protection:

- Ensure social protection for everyone, including access to Statutory Sick Pay without income thresholds and including self employed people
- Review Universal Credit and remove two child cap
 - At minimum, ensure welfare payments reflect the true cost of living, to ensure the wellbeing of women and families and reduce the risk of exploitation such as 'sex for rent'
- Introduce flexibility in Universal Credit and other key benefits to take account of challenging labour market situation
- Review no recourse to public funds in line with judgement from the Divisional Court of the Queen's Bench Division in May 2020⁷⁴
 - At a minimum, ensure women with no recourse to public funds can access protection and support, specifically protection from violence, regardless of residency status and without fear of sanction

3. Institutional mechanisms: Ensure women are represented and reflected in decision making and policy development

Institutional mechanisms are essential to ensure women and gender equality are mainstreamed. Women must also be effectively engaged in policy and decision making, and institutional mechanisms assist in enabling this. This was a core recommendation in the CEDAW Concluding Observations 2019, and forms a cornerstone of the EWL Purple Pact. Gender mainstreaming requires use of tools that effectively support evidence based decision making, including gender budgeting and equality impact assessment as integral parts of policy making rather than add-ons at a late stage of the process. A key benefit of these tools is that they enable detailed and robust analysis of policy and budget proposals, ensuring that resources are used effectively and in a targeted way; they do not constitute tools for ring fencing resources for any specific population group.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (the Commission) has made clear that the public sector equality duties⁷⁵ (Section 75) continue to apply both for ongoing policy making

⁶⁷ UN Population Fund (June 2020) Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): [UNFPA Global response plan](#)

⁶⁸ UN DESA (June 2020) [UN/DESA Policy Brief #78: Achieving the SDGs through the COVID-19 response and recovery](#)

⁶⁹ UN (April 2020) [COVID-19 and human rights: We are all in this together](#)

⁷⁰ UNICEF (May 2020) [Children in monetary poor households and COVID-19](#)

⁷¹ IMF (24 June 2020) [World Economic Outlook Update June 2020: A crisis like no other, an uncertain recovery](#)

⁷² UN Women (April 2020) [Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women](#)

⁷³ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (April 2020) [COVID-19 guidance](#)

⁷⁴ R (W , a child) v Secretary of State for the Home Department, [EWHC 1299/2020](#). The ruling holds that the 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) is unlawful. Specifically, it states that the NRPF condition must be lifted if an individual is at imminent risk of becoming destitute. It also requires the Home Office to develop a new instruction to case workers within seven days.

⁷⁵ Section 75 of the [Northern Ireland Act 1998](#)

and in respect of the ‘*quick and often challenging policy decisions*’ that may have to be made during the public health crisis⁷⁶. The Commission stresses that while the Coronavirus Act 2020 has made temporary changes to statutory law, ‘*[n]o such changes have been made in relation to the Section 75 duties or to the anti-discrimination laws*’. We note the correspondence between the Committee and the Minister regarding equality impact assessment and its publication.⁷⁷

UN Women has provided specific guidance on effective actions for parliamentarians and governments, which also emphasises gender balanced COVID-19 taskforces and effective engagement with civil society as a key action parliamentarians can take in COVID-19 recovery.⁷⁸ In Northern Ireland, the Women’s Policy Group is working on this, as women have been almost or completely excluded from existing taskforces. To date, the WPG has been successful in securing representation on only one working group, dealing with COVID-19 and civil society.

The evidence gaps and intersectional inequalities for women with multiple identities have been highlighted repeatedly by NIWEP and others in shadow reports to CEDAW, including in particular in the shadow report to the examination of the UK under CEDAW in 2013. In July 2020, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland also called for strengthened data in relation to all groups with protected characteristics, in order to secure effective and evidence based policy and response to COVID-19.⁷⁹

The indicators developed to support monitoring of progress on the SDGs provide a relevant and validated indicator set, that can inform effective and inclusive policy making in the UK. NIWEP would recommend the development of a dashboard for monitoring how COVID-19 is impacting on women and men with protected characteristics, with breakdowns for core groups including women and men with disabilities and BAME women and men and girls and boys across the life course. This dashboard could effectively be based on indicators currently used to monitor the SDGs, many of which are already being collected by the Office for National Statistics. However, it is critical that data collection accurately reflects the position across the UK, to ensure that policy and protections are on an equal footing across the four jurisdictions, as set out by for example CEDAW in the 2019 Concluding Observations⁸⁰. NIWEP would welcome the support of the Women and Equalities Committee in ensuring that all of the devolved administrations are fully aware of their obligations under international law, and effectively implement both the SDGs and CEDAW recommendations.

NIWEP would recommend the following key interventions with regard to institutional mechanisms

- Develop institutional mechanisms for gender equality and aim for parity in decision making
 - Ensure women are represented on all COVID-19 recovery taskforces and advisory groups, with meaningful engagement with women’s civil society

⁷⁶ ECNI (2020) [The Section 75 duties when developing Covid-19 related policies](#)

⁷⁷ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/881/documents/6126/default/>
<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/1411/documents/12906/default/>

⁷⁸ UN Women (June 2020) [A primer for parliamentary action: Gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19](#)

⁷⁹ Equality Commission for Northern Ireland press release 7 July 2020 ‘[Data is a vital component in tackling the impacts of COVID 19 pandemic](#)’

⁸⁰ CEDAW Committee (2019) [Concluding Observations on the 8th periodic report of the United Kingdom](#)

- Ensure evidence based decision making, using available tools to support decision making
 - Gender budgeting provides a concrete framework for monitoring and analysis of budget impacts on women and men, supporting effective budgeting
 - Equality impact assessment should be integrated into policy making from the earliest stages to ensure equitable, effective and efficient distribution of resources
 - Build capacity for the effective implementation of the Section 75 duties⁸¹
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- Strengthen a focus on human rights based wellbeing in economic decision making, to complement and address the limitations of GDP
- Develop a dashboard of gender disaggregated data broken down by age, race and disability on critical indicators, linked to the SDGs

⁸¹ ECNI (2018) [Acting On the Evidence of Public Authorities' Practice Summary Report](#)