



Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas

In-work Poverty: Women's Perspectives

2018

**Prepared by: Dr Caroline Walsh
Women's Support Network
Email: policy@wsn.org.uk**



Foyle Women's
Information
Network



Acknowledgements

This research has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which was set up with funding from the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland (now, the Department for Communities) and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland (now, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs).¹

The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion. The seven groups are as follows.

- Training for Women Network (TWN) - Project Lead
- Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- Women's Support Network (WSN)
- Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- Women's Tec
- Women's Centre Derry
- Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium ensures that there is a continuous two-way flow of information between government and the sector. It ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium ascertains the views,

¹ The remaining paragraphs in this section represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisations.

needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately result in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

Contents	Page
Executive Summary	4
1. Introduction	11
1.1 Background	11
1.2 Overall aim and objectives	11
1.3 Methodology	11
1.4 Layout	12
2. Project framing	13
2.1 Introduction	13
2.2 In-work poverty: contested and complex	13
2.3 Gender and in-work poverty	15
2.4 In-work poverty as policy challenge	18
2.5 Section summary	20
3. In-work poverty: women's perspectives	22
3.1 Introduction	22
3.2 Reported correlations and consequences	22
3.3 Remedial measures	24
3.4 Section summary	25
4. Conclusion, summary of findings and recommendations	26

Executive summary

This brief paper explores the perspectives on ‘in-work poverty’² of a cohort of women living and working in rural and disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland.

In very broad terms, in-work poverty ‘occurs when working families do not have an income that is high enough to lift them over the poverty line’ and thus provide for a decent standard of living.³ The implications of in-work poverty for everyday lives can be profound, including adverse effects on wellbeing, social inclusion, life chances, life outcomes, agency, relationships and housing security.⁴ Accordingly, in-work poverty can represent a substantive multidimensional social justice challenge for policymakers.

In recent decades, the risk of poverty for adults living in working households in the United Kingdom increased substantially, rising by 26.5 per cent between 2004/5 and 2014/15.⁵ According to recent research, such poverty comprises forty-five per cent of income poverty in the Northern Ireland-specific case,⁶ meaning that over three fifths of individuals in poverty in the jurisdiction reside in households with at least one adult in work.⁷ These changes have been accompanied by significant rises in the number of poor children in working households.⁸

² As will be later shown, in-work poverty is a contested notion, characterised by debate over its definition and measurement. That said, the paper will rely on the well-established notion of in-work poverty as connoting the condition where the aggregate income of a given household with one or more adults in work - in being 60 per cent below median income for the given jurisdiction - is insufficient to enable a decent standard of living. This definition of in-work poverty can be differently presented in the literature as either a before or after housing cost measure. The latter tends to be preferred as a relative measure as it takes account of regional variation in housing costs. Department for Communities, ‘The Northern Ireland households below average income report (2015-16) is released’, DFC, Belfast: 2017. R. Hick and A. Lanau. ‘In-work poverty in the UK: problem, policy analysis and platform for action’, Cardiff University, Cardiff: 2017. C. Harkins and Egan J. *The rise of in-work poverty and the changing nature of poverty and work in Scotland: what are the implications for population health?*. Glasgow: GCPH; 2013

³ G. Gottfried and K. Lawton, ‘In-work poverty in the recession: briefing note’, IPPR: London, 2010, p.1.

⁴ Eurofound, ‘In-work poverty in the EU’, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2017. Harkins and Egan, op. cit.

⁵ Hick and Lanau, op. cit., p.12.

⁶ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, ‘Monitoring poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland 2016’, JRF: London, 2016.

⁷ Department for Communities, op. cit.

⁸ P. Butler, ‘Child poverty in UK at highest level since 2010, official figures show’, *The Guardian*, 16 March 2018. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/mar/16/child-poverty-in-uk-at-highest-level-since-2010-official-figures-show>

Research suggests how, since 2010, these poverty trends may have been significantly affected by austerity measures.⁹ It has been observed that although the United Kingdom economy has grown in this period, the risk of poverty for low-income working households has increased through a combination of austerity cuts to working-age benefits, high rents and low wages.¹⁰ And, in analysis of differences in poverty risk factors between Northern Ireland and the remainder of the United Kingdom, commentators point to heightened risk associated with the former's comparatively higher childcare costs,¹¹ economic inactivity and benefit claimant levels, as well as comparatively lower average earnings.¹²

Research also suggests how gender can intersect with in-work poverty in significant ways. This point is usefully illustrated by brief consideration of two factors cited as correlated to the in-work poverty trends at hand. The first of these entails the gendered dimension of the poverty impact of post-2010 austerity constraints on both in- and out-of-work social security income. As is well established, this austerity model has disproportionately impacted women adversely, as compared to men, making 'many [more] women poorer and less financially autonomous'.¹³ The second involves the relationship between the trends and precarious employment. Research identifies the latter as a significant factor underlying in-work poverty.¹⁴ Such precarity is starkly evident in the over-representation of women in low paid, low status, part-time and sporadic employment, and this over-representation correlates strongly to enduring gendered cultural-structural phenomena, such as the social division of labour.

⁹ See, for example, N. Hudson-Sharp et al., 'The impact of welfare reform and welfare-to-work programmes: an evidence review', Research Report 111, Equality and Human Rights Commission: London, 2018.

¹⁰ JRF, 'In-work poverty hits record high as the housing crisis fuels insecurity', JRF: London, 2016. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/press/work-poverty-hits-record-high-housing-crisis-fuels-insecurity>

¹¹ On childcare costs, see R. McQuaid, H. Graham and M. Shapira, 'Childcare: maximising the economic participation of women', Equality Commission for Northern Ireland: Belfast, 2013.

¹² JRF, 'Monitoring poverty', op. cit.

¹³ Fawcett Society, 'The impact of austerity on women, policy briefing', Fawcett Society: London, 2012, p.3.

¹⁴ A. McKnight, et al., 'Low pay and in-work poverty: preventative measures and preventative approaches', European Commission: Brussels, 2016.

This picture of the relationship of gender to prevailing in-work poverty raises social justice questions of gender equality and women's rights. And, it is precisely against this particular backdrop that the paper seeks to capture the perspectives on women's experience of in-work poverty of a cohort of women living and working in disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland. To that end, the project has included focus group and questionnaire engagement.

The principal findings of the project are set out below followed by recommendations for remedial policy and practice, which the findings inform.

Summary of key findings

Participants identified the following as substantive issues in women's experience of in-work poverty in Northern Ireland requiring urgent robust intervention from policymakers:

- **lack of affordable childcare** as a fundamental impediment to women's economic participation and financial independence;
- the constraining effect on working household income of **prohibitive childcare costs in combination with high rents**, particularly in the private rented sector;
- government inaction on **rent affordability**;
- **inadequacy of means-tested government support** for poor working families, underscored by the relationship between in-work poverty and **austerity cuts** to the tax and benefit system;
- the relationship between women's **in-work poverty and precarious employment** (characterised by women's over-representation in low paid, part-time, low status, sporadic and unstable jobs);
- the link between lower levels of **education and the risk of in-work poverty**;
- the lack of effectual policymaking on **adequate earnings** to enhance real-term wages, and the subsequent need for job creation policy explicitly targeting '**work that pays**' for **disadvantaged women** (i.e. employment that provides a genuine living wage indexed to the actual cost of living);
- the impact of in-work poverty on **child wellbeing**;

- the manifestation, and health and wellbeing implications, of in-work poverty as **food and fuel poverty**;
- **rural transport infrastructural inadequacy** as a fundamental impediment to rural women's access to attractive labour markets;
- the association between **in-work poverty and relationship difficulty**, including domestic abuse;
- threats to the **sustainability of community-based anti-poverty women sector provision**, particularly the women centre delivery model, entailing the integration of childcare delivery with educational opportunity and vital frontline support; and,
- the association between **in-work poverty and constrained mental health**, compounded by chronic austerity related underfunding and underprovision of mental health services, particularly provision at the level of the community.

These findings have informed the following recommendations.

Recommendations

- **Support for working incomes: austerity rethink**
 - It is recommended that government seek to remedially address inadequacy of existing means-tested support for poor working households, particularly that associated with austerity tax and benefit reform. This would require a fundamental rethink of austerity.

- **Precarity of employment, low pay and in-work poverty**
 - Government should take due account of the association between women's in-work poverty and precarious, low paid employment, pursuing anti-poverty job creation ambitions for women that explicitly promote the notion of a genuine living wage linked to the actual cost of living.
 - More generally, government should commit to robust policy development in promotion of adequate earnings in pay regulation and related initiatives, taking more seriously the correlation between low pay and in-work poverty.

- **Childcare affordability and in-work poverty**
 - Government should seek to properly address the enduring relationship of prohibitive childcare costs in Northern Ireland to women’s lack of economic participation and financial independence. Due consideration should be given therein to sectoral concern that intervention under the proposed childcare strategy for the region may ultimately prove distinctly insubstantial.

- **Women and austerity: cultivating a rights-based perspective**
 - Government should endeavour to capture and address the cumulative impact of austerity on women’s equality and wellbeing, cultivating a robust rights-based perspective on this debate such as might allow it to identify more fully the wider social justice issues at stake.

- **Austerity, mental health and in-work poverty**
 - Government should undertake to address the association between austerity, in-work poverty and constrained mental health, ring-fencing mental health from any further fiscal cuts under extended austerity.¹⁵

- **Anti-poverty action: women sector community-based provision**
 - In support of working families in disadvantaged areas, government should take seriously the case for sustained and enhanced anti-poverty women sector intervention at the level of community, especially that provided within the women centre delivery model, which integrates childcare, educational opportunity and vital frontline support.

- **Women’s educational disadvantage**
 - In seeking to take account of the association between educational underachievement and the risk/experience of in-work poverty, government should pursue strategic policy development expressly

¹⁵ This notion of ring-fencing is explored in the literature; G. Wilson et al. ‘Regress? React? Resolve? An evaluation of mental health service provision in Northern Ireland’, QUB: Belfast, 2015.

geared to identify and address the particular learning needs of marginalised, disadvantaged women.

▪ **In-work poverty and high rents**

- Government should attend to the relationship between in-work poverty and housing tenure, developing robust rent affordability initiatives to meaningfully address austerity-aggravated tenant vulnerability and problematic debt.

▪ **In-work poverty and child wellbeing**

- We would urge government to take proper account of the correlation between in-work poverty and risk to child wellbeing as well as the ‘antecedents’¹⁶ of intergenerational in-work poverty in childhood experience of poverty.

▪ **Rural need**

- Government should seek to properly address inadequacy in rural transport infrastructure as a substantive impediment to rural women accessing attractive labour markets.

▪ **Equality responsive budgeting**

- It is recommended that government give due regard to the accountability and efficacy case for gender budgeting across all policy and planning processes in pursuit of improved equality outcomes.

▪ **Gender disaggregated data gaps**

- Government should attend to any gender disaggregated data gaps in the available evidence base such as might undermine the effectiveness of remedial intervention across the policy prioritisation categories identified in this paper.

¹⁶ McKnight, et al., op. cit., p.3.

- **Disadvantaged women's voices: inclusion in policy development**
 - Finally, across all of the policy prioritisation areas identified here, government should commit to providing for more meaningful stakeholder engagement with disadvantaged women across all implicated policy development, monitoring and review processes, ensuring their voices are explicitly heard and their perspectives, needs and interests properly recognised and accommodated.

Section 1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In 2012, the Department for Social Development in partnership with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development launched a programme aimed at providing regional support for women in 'areas of greatest need' across Northern Ireland, defined as disadvantaged and rural areas.¹⁷ More precisely, the programme sought to 'serve the needs of marginalised and isolated women'¹⁸ in these areas by 'enabl[ing] them to tackle disadvantage and fulfil their potential in overcoming the barriers that give rise to their marginalisation [a]nd experience of poverty and exclusion'.¹⁹

The Women's Regional Consortium is funded under this programme and the brief for this small-scale project originated within that policy development context.

1.2 Overall aim and objectives

The overall aim of the paper is to explore the perspectives on women's experience of in-work poverty of a cohort of women living and working in disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland. Two central research objectives pertain:

- to capture and analyse women's perspectives on in-work poverty; and,
- to formulate policy recommendations based on the project findings.

1.3 Methodology

The project employed a mixed methodological approach, which included focus group and questionnaire engagement with the selected cohort as follows:

- Women's Centre Derry carried out a focus group at its Derry premises;
- WSN organised questionnaire engagement with women centre managers and women's group representation (Ballybeen Women's Centre, Chrysalis Women's Centre, Windsor Women's Centre, Atlas Women's Centre and Lenadoon Women's Group); and,

¹⁷ DSD/OFMDFM, 'Review of government funding for women's groups and organisations', DSD/OFMDFM: Belfast, 2012, p.32.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.41.

¹⁹ DSD/NISRA, 'Regional support for women in disadvantaged and rural areas: survey of women's groups analysis', DSD/NISRA: Belfast, 2013, p.3.

- WSN organised questionnaire engagement with women centre users in partnership with Atlas Women's Centre.

Women were asked for their views on the experience of women in poor working households, the impact of austerity on that experience and government intervention to remedially address it.

1.4 Layout

To theoretically frame the project, we begin in Section 2 by exploring key dimensions of the wider debate on in-work poverty. The outcome of the focus group and questionnaire engagement is then introduced in Section 3. The paper concludes in Section 4 by summarising the project's key findings and setting out associated policy recommendations.

Section 2 Framing the project

2.1 Introduction

This section seeks to theoretically frame the project by briefly exploring key dimensions of the wider debate on in-work poverty.

We will focus, first, on in-work poverty as a contested notion and complex phenomenon, then on the relationship between gender and in-work poverty and, finally, on in-work poverty as a substantive social justice challenge to policymaking.

2.2 In-work poverty: contested and complex

In very broad terms, in-work poverty 'occurs when working families do not have an income that is high enough to lift them over the poverty line' and thus provide for a decent standard of living.²⁰ Yet, in-work poverty is a contested notion, characterised by disagreement as to its definition and measurement, for example, disagreement as to whether poverty should be measured in terms of income or material deprivation.²¹ That said, this project relies on a well-established notion of in-work poverty as connoting the condition where the aggregate income of a given household with one or more adults in work - in being 60 per cent below median income for the given jurisdiction - is insufficient to enable a decent standard of living.²²

Analysis of in-work poverty is thus not about consideration of income at the level of the individual, but rather overall household income, and whether it is sufficient to meet aggregate household needs, both adults' *and* children's.²³ However, analysis of in-work poverty as poverty across the household at large is frustrated by the reality that it cannot be assumed that income is fairly or equally shared or distributed across the wider household.²⁴ This complication is usefully illustrated by brief consideration of some of the major factors underlying in-work poverty.

²⁰ Gottfried and Lawton, *op. cit.*, p.1.

²¹ Eurofound, *op. cit.*

²² Hick and Lanau, *op. cit.* As previously noted, this definition of in-work poverty can be differently presented in the literature as either a before or after housing cost measure. The latter tends to be preferred as a relative measure as it takes account of regional variation in housing costs.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.9.

In recent decades, the risk of poverty for adults living in working households in the United Kingdom increased substantially, rising by 26.5 per cent between 2004/5 and 2014/15.²⁵ And, according to recent research on the Northern Ireland-specific case, such poverty comprises forty-five per cent of income poverty,²⁶ meaning that over three fifths of individuals in poverty in the jurisdiction reside in households with at least one adult in work.²⁷ These changes have been accompanied by significant rises in the number of children in poverty in working households.²⁸

While research partially associates these trends in in-work poverty with increases in low-paid employment,²⁹ the relationship between in-work poverty and low pay is 'far from straightforward'.³⁰ Furthermore, while research suggests that having only one worker in the household is a 'key determinant' of in-work poverty, the relationship between the experience of poverty and number of workers within the home is also far from straightforward.³¹ So, for example, research indicates that although around half of individuals in in-work poverty in the United Kingdom live in households with a low paid worker, most low paid workers in the region are not actually categorised as being in in-work poverty since they reside in households with additional earners.³² But, since, as noted, it cannot be assumed that income is equally or fairly distributed or shared across the household at large, it cannot be taken for granted what the impact of additional earning of this kind might actually mean for the given low earner's standard of living.³³

So far, we have examined in-work poverty as a complex contested notion. Because we are specifically concerned in this project with the question of women's experience of in-work poverty, we turn now to examine the relationship between gender and in-work poverty.

²⁵ Hick and Lanau, *op. cit.*, p.12.

²⁶ JRF, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Department for Communities, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Hick and Lanau, *op. cit.*; also, Butler, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Hirsch, *op. cit.*; and, McKnight, et al., *op. cit.*

³⁰ Hick and Lanau, *op. cit.*, p.5.

³¹ Hirsch, *op. cit.*, p.3.

³² Hick and Lanau, *op. cit.*

³³ *Ibid.*, also, Hirsch, *op. cit.*

2.3 Gender and in-work poverty

Poverty is gendered in the sense that its occurrence and consequences are profoundly affected by the manner in which social structures produce gender inequalities that heighten the risk of poverty for women.³⁴ More precisely, gendered structural relations and processes can contribute to women's poverty by constraining their opportunities for material distribution and status/privilege, profoundly restricting their life chances and outcomes in respect of, inter alia, autonomy, social mobility, lifetime earnings and access to power/authority.³⁵ The relationship between gender and poverty is such that the former remains a 'prime determinant' of poverty,³⁶ and poverty in general, persistent poverty and recurrent episodic poverty are all 'more likely to involve women' than men.³⁷

Research suggests how gender can interact with in-work poverty in significant ways: '[when] in-work poverty is dissected ... it turns out to be affected by ...gender roles and structures'.³⁸ This point is usefully illustrated by brief consideration of two gendered factors cited as correlated to the nature of in-work poverty in the United Kingdom case in recent decades.

The first factor entails the contribution to in-work poverty of post-2010 austerity constraints on household income resultant from change to the tax and benefit system.³⁹ For example, research notes that tax credits can 'substantially' reduce the risk of in-work poverty and that the extant austerity freeze on them has fundamentally threatened economic wellbeing in working poor households.⁴⁰ However, tax credits equate to only about one-third of total social security income in such households,⁴¹ and, because in-work poverty is measured in terms of combined household income, its measurement includes income from both in- *and* out-of-work social security income. Accordingly, in considering the impact of austerity social

³⁴ F. Bennett and M. Daly, 'Poverty through a gender lens: evidence and policy review on gender and poverty', Joseph Rowntree Foundation/University of Oxford: London/Oxford, 2014, p.105.

³⁵ Certain groups may be more vulnerable, and thus more at risk of poverty than others, for example, women living alone, migrant women, elderly women, lone mothers and women with disabilities. EIGE, 'Gender in poverty and social inclusion', EIGE: Vilnius, 2016.

³⁶ Bennett and Daly, op. cit., p.13.

³⁷ Ibid., p.9.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See Hick and Lanau, op. cit.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.3.

⁴¹ Ibid.

security income change on in-work poverty, it is necessary to take account not just of tax credits but also change to the totality of provision affecting poor working households, to include, for example, child benefit, housing benefit and job seekers' allowance.⁴² The important point here is this: as is well established, the austerity model at hand disproportionately impacted women adversely, as compared to men, making 'many [more] women poorer and less financially autonomous'.⁴³ It is projected that, by 2020, women will have sustained 86 per cent of total income loss associated with this change.⁴⁴

Women can be particularly vulnerable to recession driven austerity cuts in welfare spending given gendered differentials in financial vulnerability correlated to their lack of economic participation. This includes gendered financial vulnerability involving the relationship between restricted participation, the aggregate unpaid work and time burden placed on women by the gendered division of labour in the private sphere and welfare dependency.

The second gendered factor cited as correlated to the in-work poverty change under review involves precarity of employment.⁴⁵ A major dimension of that precarity is characterised by the over-representation of women in low paid, low status, part-time and sporadic employment, as reflected, for example, in recent significant rises in zero-hour contracts among lone mothers.⁴⁶ Women in the region are considerably more likely to be paid below the real living wage than men, while the differential between part-time and full-time workers is stark.⁴⁷ The point here is this: this labour

⁴² Hick and Lanau, op. cit. On the cumulative impact of the reform, see Hudson-Sharp et al., op. cit.

⁴³ Fawcett Society, op. cit., p.3. On this, see, 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, Scottish Government, 'The gender impact of welfare reform', Scottish Government: Edinburgh, 2013,

⁴⁴ In 2017, it was estimated that austerity-driven tax and benefit change in the United Kingdom since 2010 had 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>.

⁴⁵ Hirsch, op. cit.

⁴⁶ A. Topping, 'Rise in zero-hours jobs for single parents 'risks causing child poverty'', *The Guardian*, 21 February 2018.

⁴⁷ KPMG, 'Living wage research for KPMG', KPMG: London, 2017. R. Curry, 'Fifth of UK workers still earning below 'real' living wage', *The Telegraph*, 5 November, 2017.

market instability is greatly contributed to by distinctly gendered cultural-structural factors, such as the aforementioned social division of labour.

By ascribing to women the social role of primary care giver and domestic labourer, thus placing on them a disproportionate unpaid work and time burden in the private sphere, the social division of labour can not only constrain but also preclude female economic participation. In reducing women's financial independence, it can also, as already implied, increase women's reliance on state income.⁴⁸ In addition, it may increase reliance on partner income. This reliance can be problematic precisely because, as noted, it cannot be assumed that income is fairly or equally distributed or shared across households.⁴⁹ Where household resources are unequally/unfairly distributed, reliance on partner income can heighten the risk of hidden poverty for women, i.e. gendered poverty within the household.⁵⁰

This picture of women's financial disempowerment associable with the gendered division of labour is further complicated by the cumulative impact of other interacting contextual factors on women's financial autonomy, such as⁵¹ the devaluing/undervaluing of care work in policy development; lone parent status;⁵² the effect of childcare costs on incomes;⁵³ and, gender differentials in debt.⁵⁴

The relationship between gender, housing and in-work poverty is also implicated in this debate. In virtue of its innately constraining effect on disposable income, housing cost represents the variable most directly associable with the impact of housing on poverty.⁵⁵ As with other regions of the United Kingdom, against a backdrop of

⁴⁸ Clearly, the ultimate inherent danger of public sphere exclusion of this kind is that some women's agency might become totally restricted to the realm of the private sphere, wholly characterised in terms of assumed role of 'economically inactive', unpaid primary care giver/domestic labourer.

⁴⁹ Hick and Lanau, op. cit.

⁵⁰ Obviously, such partner reliance can also contribute to the future risk of poverty in the event of relationship breakdown or the death of a partner; Bennett and Daly, op. cit.

⁵¹ The following draws on a list of factors developed by Bennett and Daly, *ibid*.

⁵² For example, persistent poverty is particularly high among lone parents in Northern Ireland.

⁵³ It has been estimated that childcare costs in Northern Ireland amount to 44 per cent of an average income, as compared to 33 per cent in Great Britain and 12 per cent across the EU. R. McQuaid, H. Graham, H. and M. Shapira, 'Childcare: maximising the economic participation of women', Equality Commission for Northern Ireland: Belfast, 2013.

⁵⁴ For example, according to 2013 research, women constituted almost two-thirds of those with severe debt problems in the United Kingdom. Money Advice Service, 'Press release, 27 November, 2013'.

⁵⁵ R. Tunstall et al., 'The links between housing and poverty: an evidence review', Joseph Rowntree Foundation: London, 2013.

shrinking social housing, low-income families in Northern Ireland have become increasingly reliant on the private rented sector, where security of tenure is lacking, giving rise to increased housing vulnerability.⁵⁶ Recent increases in poverty in the jurisdiction have been pronounced in this sector,⁵⁷ associable with a combination of high rents, low wages and the advent of the austerity agenda. That agenda included uprating changes in local housing allowance rates, which have imposed significant downward pressure on rent affordability.⁵⁸ Women are over-represented in this sector, and the relative rate of poverty for them, as compared to men in the sector, has ‘substantially’ increased under austerity.⁵⁹ There has, of course, been some commitment by government to mitigate some dimensions of austerity-driven reform of social welfare. However, there is evidence that where such time-limited mitigation ceases, affected cohorts can tend to experience increased financial and housing vulnerability.⁶⁰

We turn now to examine the nature of in-work poverty as an enduring policy challenge.

2.4 Policymaking challenge

The implications of in-work poverty for everyday lives can be profound, including adverse effects on wellbeing, life chances and outcomes, agency, housing security, relationships, mental health and social inclusion.⁶¹ In-work poverty thus represents a substantive multidimensional social justice challenge for policymaking.

So, what can be done at the level of policymaking to meaningfully and effectively address this challenge? Research illustrates that recent policymaking on in-work poverty across the European Union has largely tended to focus on ‘getting people

⁵⁶ A. Wallace, ‘Housing and communities’ inequalities in Northern Ireland’, University of York: York, 2015, p.13.

⁵⁷ JRF, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ T. O’Sullivan, G. Young and K. Gibb, ‘The Belfast metropolitan housing market area: a local housing system analysis’, NIHE: Belfast, 2010.

⁵⁹ Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 56 and p.20.

⁶⁰ S. Fitzpatrick et al., ‘The homelessness monitor: Northern Ireland 2013’, Crisis: London: 2013. See also, Beatty C. et al., ‘Monitoring the impact of recent measures affecting housing benefit and local housing allowances in the private sector in Northern Ireland - final report’, Sheffield Hallam University: Sheffield, 2014.

⁶¹ Eurofound, *op. cit.* Also, Harkins and Egan, *op. cit.*

into work'.⁶² However, such a manoeuvre can ultimately prove counterproductive if unaccompanied by substantive intervention on other key factors underlying in-work poverty, such as income levels.⁶³ In the United Kingdom specific case, there has, of course, been an emphasis on a 'national living wage' in recent policymaking. However, as commentators observed, this initiative was not indexed to the actual cost of living and its potential contribution to poverty reduction remains distinctly limited as a result.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the introduction of this initiative came in a context of austerity characterised, as noted, by significant reduction in social security income for poorer working households. This points to stark policy inconsistency: on the one hand, increases in hourly earnings were promoted as a significant poverty response but, on the other hand, means-tested support for working incomes was significantly scaled back under austerity modelling, threatening the income boost potential of the former.⁶⁵ In this sense, 'the living wage rise is not what it says on the tin'.⁶⁶

Furthermore, boosting hourly wages does not, of course, address other key factors underlying in-work poverty such as precarity of employment.⁶⁷ Since factors cited as correlated to such precarity and thus to a heightened risk of in-work poverty include lower levels of education and childhood deprivation, effective policymaking on precarity would also include early intervention to address the risk of intergenerationality in in-work poverty.⁶⁸

On this view, effective policymaking on in-work poverty would combine adequate means-tested support for working incomes with meaningful intervention to promote adequate earnings in pay regulation and initiatives that address precarity.⁶⁹ In addition, more meaningful intervention is required to address the relationship between housing tenure and in-work poverty, and the absence of free and affordable

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁶³ Hick and Lanau, *op. cit.*; Gottfried and Lawton, *op. cit.*; and, McKnight et al., *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ See, for example, LWF, 'What is the real living wage?' [Online]. Available at: <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/what-real-living-wage>

⁶⁵ See, for example, R. Partington, 'Government's Easter pay rise is not all it's cracked up to be'. *The Guardian*, 1 April 2018. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/apr/01/governments-easter-pay-rise-is-not-all-its-cracked-up-to-be>

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ D. Hirsch, 'The 'living wage 'and low income: can adequate pay contribute to adequate family living standards?' *Critical Social Policy*, 38 (1), pp.1-20, 2017.

⁶⁸ McKnight, et al., *op cit.*

⁶⁹ Hirsch, *op. cit.*

childcare as a substantive barrier to paid employment.⁷⁰ The former would involve taking account of increased reliance of poor working households on the private rented sector, where high housing costs correlate to high poverty rates.⁷¹ Commentators observe that in the absence of effective intervention to curb these costs, policymaking on in-work poverty will remain essentially flawed.⁷²

What about policymaking specifically on the question of women's experience of in-work poverty? As implied, the correlation between poverty and gender comprises patterned structural-cultural associations that cut across both the public and private spheres, produced and reproduced in ordinary interactions that characterise everyday life. And, women's economic marginalisation is therefore a structural phenomenon that ultimately can only be meaningfully and effectively tackled with substantive remedial change that cuts across both domains, whether at the level of the cultural, the political, the socioeconomic or the legal. Addressing women's in-work poverty thus calls for the explicit promotion of gender equality across both spheres.

Gender equality corresponds positively to economic growth, the former 'can contribute significantly' to the latter precisely by 'expanding the stock of human capital, raising labour productivity, improving agricultural productivity and increasing the stock of physical capital'.⁷³ The promotion of gender equality is thus of benefit to society at large, but to help realise that benefit government must be explicitly committed to integrating its promotion into core high level economic strategising.

2.5 Section summary

This section sought to theoretically frame the project by briefly exploring key dimensions of the wider debate on in-work poverty. To that end, we have examined in-work poverty as a contested, complex notion; the relationship between gender and in-work poverty; and, in-work poverty as a substantive challenge to policymaking.

⁷⁰ Hick and Lanau, *op.cit.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ J. Ward et al., 'Evidence for action gender equality and economic growth', Chatham House: London, 2010, p.xiii.

As we have seen, in-work poverty is a complex social problem requiring complex multidimensional policy prescriptions, such as might address the totality of interacting factors underlying that complexity (at the level of the cultural-structural and beyond).

We turn now to an exploration of the findings that emerged from the engagement dimension of the project.

Section 3 Women's perspectives on in-work poverty

3.1 Introduction

This section captures and analyses the perspectives on in-work poverty of a cohort of women living and working in rural and disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland who engaged in the project's focus group and questionnaire processes.

As will be shown, participants articulated profound concern at women's experience of in-work poverty in the jurisdiction, identifying a plethora of implicated correlations and consequences. As will also be shown, in-work poverty was characterised as a substantive multidimensional social problem fundamentally impacted by ongoing austerity cuts to the tax and benefit system, and participants subsequently appealed for urgent intervention to address the problem in its totality, to include a fundamental rethink and reversal of austerity.

We begin, first, by examining the correlations and consequences and then the proposed interventions.

3.2 In-work poverty: reported correlations and consequences

Across all engagement, participants pointed to ongoing austerity change to the tax and benefit system - change to both in- and out-of-work social security income - as a major contributing factor to women's experience of in-work poverty in Northern Ireland. Cited change included the extant freeze on working age benefits. On this view, ongoing austerity was 'pushing [working] women into poverty, crisis ... and trying to survive' (participant) since 'day to day living costs have increased but less money is coming in' (participant). Inadequacy of means-tested government support for poor working families, including poor working mothers, thus emerged as a key discursive theme.

Lack of affordable childcare as a fundamental impediment to women's economic participation and financial independence was universally identified as a major contributing factor to this account of women's experience of in-work poverty. The lack of affordable afterschool childcare was widely cited as particularly problematic,

given its potential to undermine women's capacity to extend their participation in the labour market beyond part-time status.

The inadequacy of wage levels (manifest in low, stagnant and static incomes) to facilitate a decent standard of living was also widely cited as a key concern, particularly in consideration of in-work poverty among young people, including lone mothers. The link between precarity of employment – particularly zero hours contracts - and in-work poverty was also widely referenced. Participants subsequently underlined the 'need [for] stability and security' in employment and legislative action prohibiting such contracts. On this view, addressing in-work poverty effectively at the level of policymaking calls, first and foremostly, for 'work that pays' for disadvantaged women (i.e. employment that provides a genuine living wage indexed to the actual cost of living).

The association between women's lack of educational attainment and low wages was cited as a further complicating factor in this debate. That said, participants also emphasised that even third level qualification was no guarantee against in-work poverty, anecdotally evidencing this observation. Against this backdrop, emphasis was placed on the role of community-based anti-poverty women sector provision in supporting educationally disadvantaged women in low income working households in or at risk of poverty. Particular emphasis was placed on the effectiveness of the women centre delivery model in enhancing women's prospects of economic participation, and progressing anti-poverty policy ambition, precisely by integrating low-cost childcare provision, educational opportunity and vital frontline support. Alarm was subsequently expressed about threats to the sustainability of this provision, including substantive austerity associated funding reductions.

In discussion of the rural dimension of women's lack of economic participation, participants pointed to enduring transport infrastructural inadequacy as fundamentally significant, impeding rural women's access to attractive labour markets. This infrastructural issue was also identified as a major compounding factor in the experience of rural isolation and social exclusion, particularly among young, lone working mothers.

The constraining impact of high childcare costs on working household income was depicted as exacerbated by the constraining impact of high rents. In this sense, participants drew attention to the relationship between in-work poverty and housing tenure. While the poverty impact of rent affordability was presented as a particular problem in the private rented sector, rent disparity in the social housing sector between housing association and Northern Ireland Housing Executive delivery was also categorised as problematic. Austerity cuts to social security were categorised as a further complicating factor.

In-work poverty was characterised as having a profound multidimensional impact on women's everyday lives, a key component of which entailed mental health implications across the family at large, as manifest in a distinct link between 'money worries' - 'struggling to make ends meet' - and a range of conditions that included stress, anxiety and depression. This point was neatly summarised by one participant thus: 'financial struggles often impact on the entire family ... a knock-on effect for everyone's wellbeing', and by another thus: 'struggling to make ends meet creates stress, sleepless nights, a feeling of failure [and] worry for children'. The impact on child wellbeing was underlined.

Austerity was widely cited as strongly correlated to this mental health nexus: 'the pressure women are currently under due to ongoing austerity is having a major negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing' (participant). This dilemma was further depicted as compounded by austerity related underfunding and underprovision of mental health services, particularly provision at level of the community. In this sense, government policymaking on austerity was held as having a profoundly adverse impact on wellbeing and prosperity in disadvantaged communities at the level of the individual, the wider family and beyond.

In-work poverty was further characterised as correlated to problematic debt, food and fuel poverty, relationship breakdown, domestic violence, social disconnectedness, substance abuse and constrained child development.

3.3 Remedial measures

A broad consensus subsequently emerged among participants according to which government action on in-work poverty had to date proven distinctly underwhelming.

An appeal was subsequently made for urgent intervention to address the problem in its totality. It was held that any such intervention should expressly have at its heart a fundamental rethink and reversal of austerity.

In addition, appeals were made for more effective and meaningful action on the other reported key implicated factors: inadequacy of earnings; precarious employment; childcare affordability; rent affordability; threats to the sustainability of community-based anti-poverty women sector provision, particularly the women centre delivery model; women's educational disadvantage; inadequacy of support for working mothers from employers and the state and, more generally, inadequacy of state income support for poor working families; domestic abuse; problematic debt; constrained child wellbeing and development; food and fuel poverty; social disconnectedness, isolation and exclusion; underprovision and under-resourcing of mental health; and, rural transport infrastructural inadequacy as an impediment to women's access to attractive labour markets

3.4 Summary

This section set out and analysed the perspectives on in-work poverty of a cohort of women living and working in rural and disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland who engaged in the project's focus group and questionnaire processes.

As we have seen, participants articulated profound concern at women's experience of in-work poverty in the jurisdiction, identifying a plethora of implicated correlations and consequences. In-work poverty was characterised as a substantive multidimensional social problem fundamentally impacted by ongoing austerity cuts to the tax and benefit system. And, as we have also seen, a broad consensus subsequently emerged appealing for substantive intervention to address the problem in its totality, to include an end to austerity in all its guises.

Section 4 Conclusion

The overall aim of this brief paper was to capture the perspectives on women's experience of in-work poverty of a cohort of women living and working in rural and disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland. In framing the project, we explored key dimensions of the wider debate on in-work poverty, including in-work poverty as a contested complex notion and multidimensional social problem; the relationship between gender and in-work poverty; and, the question of effective policymaking on this problem.

As observed, project participants lent anecdotal insight into the nature and scale of in-work poverty in the jurisdiction, citing (i) a plethora of correlations between in-work poverty, gender, housing cost, precarity of employment, lack of education, low pay, lone parent status, austerity cuts and high childcare costs; and, (ii) a plethora of consequences for wellbeing at the level of the individual and beyond. As further observed, government policymaking was sharply critiqued as a major contributor to such poverty, and that contribution was variously characterised in terms of *inaction* on different poverty risk factors such as low pay, high rents and high childcare costs. That said, particular opprobrium was reserved for the implications of government *action*, especially under austerity, comprising the gendered effect of seismic cuts to income support for poor working families and shrinking support service provision, at the level of community and beyond.

It is projected that extended austerity 'is contributing to inequality that will make economic weakness longer-lived and [lead] to the suffering of the poor for many years'.⁷⁴ And, this picture is complicated by poverty projections associated with the potential structural consequences of the impending withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union.⁷⁵ From a social justice perspective, while the structural status quo of in-work poverty in Northern Ireland is in itself of profound

⁷⁴ J. Stiglitz, quoted in Oxfam, 'Oxfam briefing paper summary: a cautionary tale - the true cost of austerity and inequality in Europe', Oxfam: London, 2013, p.2.

⁷⁵ A. Armstrong et al. 'The EU referendum and fiscal impact on low-income households', National Institute of Economic and Social Research, London: 2016. . Begg and F. Mushövel, 'The economic impact of Brexit: jobs, growth and the public finances', London School of Economics: London, 2016. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/europeanInstitute/LSE-Commission/Hearing-11---The-impact-of-Brexit-on-jobs-and-economic-growth-sumary.pdf>.

concern, these projections serve to heighten that concern, underlining the urgency of questions of remedial intervention. Given the relationship between gender and poverty, such structural intervention should expressly include an explicit focus on gender equality and women's rights, to include a focus on gender budgeting.

These observations, findings and conclusions have informed the formulation of policy recommendations. These recommendations are set out below following a summary of the project's key findings.

Summary of key findings

Participants identified the following as substantive issues in women's experience of in-work poverty in Northern Ireland requiring urgent robust intervention from policymakers:

- **lack of affordable childcare** as a fundamental impediment to women's economic participation and financial independence;
- the constraining effect on working household income of **prohibitive childcare costs in combination with high rents**, particularly in the private rented sector;
- government inaction on **rent affordability**;
- **inadequacy of means-tested government support** for poor working families, underscored by the relationship between in-work poverty and **austerity cuts** to the tax and benefit system;
- the relationship between women's **in-work poverty and precarious employment** (characterised by women's over-representation in low paid, part-time, low status, sporadic and unstable jobs);
- the link between lower levels of **education and the risk of in-work poverty**;
- the lack of effectual policymaking on **adequate earnings** to enhance real-term wages, and the subsequent need for job creation policy explicitly targeting '**work that pays**' for **disadvantaged women** (i.e. employment that provides a genuine living wage indexed to the actual cost of living);
- the impact of in-work poverty on **child wellbeing**;
- the manifestation, and health and wellbeing implications, of in-work poverty as **food and fuel poverty**;

- **rural transport infrastructural inadequacy** as a fundamental impediment to rural women's access to attractive labour markets;
- the association between **in-work poverty and relationship difficulty**, including domestic abuse;
- threats to the **sustainability of community-based anti-poverty women sector provision**, particularly the women centre delivery model, entailing the integration of childcare delivery with educational opportunity and vital frontline support; and,
- the association between **in-work poverty and constrained mental health**, compounded by chronic austerity related underfunding and underprovision of mental health services, particularly provision at the level of the community.

These findings have informed the following recommendations.

Recommendations

- **Support for working incomes: austerity rethink**
 - It is recommended that government seek to remedially address inadequacy of existing means-tested support for poor working households, particularly that associated with austerity tax and benefit reform. This would require would require a fundamental rethink of austerity.

- **Precairy of employment, low pay and in-work poverty**
 - Government should take due account of the association between women's in-work poverty and precarious, low paid employment, pursuing anti-poverty job creation ambitions for women that explicitly promote the notion of a genuine living wage linked to the actual cost of living.
 - More generally, government should commit to robust policy development in promotion of adequate earnings in pay regulation and related initiatives, taking more seriously the correlation between low pay and in-work poverty.

- **Childcare affordability and in-work poverty**
 - Government should seek to properly address the enduring relationship of prohibitive childcare costs in Northern Ireland to women's lack of economic participation and financial independence. Due consideration should be given therein to sectoral concern that intervention under the proposed childcare strategy for the region may ultimately prove distinctly insubstantial.

- **Women and austerity: cultivating a rights-based perspective**
 - Government should endeavour to capture and address the cumulative impact of austerity on women's equality and wellbeing, cultivating a robust rights-based perspective on this debate such as might allow it to identify more fully the wider social justice issues at stake.

- **Austerity, mental health and in-work poverty**
 - Government should undertake to address the association between austerity, in-work poverty and constrained mental health, ring-fencing mental health from any further fiscal cuts under extended austerity.

- **Anti-poverty action: women sector community-based provision**
 - In support of working families in disadvantaged areas, government should take seriously the case for sustained and enhanced anti-poverty women sector intervention at the level of community, especially that provided within the women centre delivery model, which integrates childcare, educational opportunity and vital frontline support.

- **Women's educational disadvantage**
 - In seeking to take account of the association between educational underachievement and the risk/experience of in-work poverty, government should pursue strategic policy development expressly geared to identify and address the particular learning needs of marginalised, disadvantaged women.

- **In-work poverty and high rents**
 - Government should attend to the relationship between in-work poverty and housing tenure, developing robust rent affordability initiatives to meaningfully address austerity-aggravated tenant vulnerability and problematic debt.

- **In-work poverty and child wellbeing**
 - We would urge government to take proper account of the correlation between in-work poverty and risk to child wellbeing as well as the ‘antecedents’⁷⁶ of intergenerational in-work poverty in childhood experience of poverty.

- **Rural need**
 - Government should seek to properly address inadequacy in rural transport infrastructure as a substantive impediment to rural women accessing attractive labour markets.

- **Equality responsive budgeting**
 - It is recommended that government give due regard to the accountability and efficacy case for gender budgeting across all policy and planning processes in pursuit of improved equality outcomes.

- **Gender disaggregated data gaps**
 - Government should attend to any gender disaggregated data gaps in the available evidence base such as might undermine the effectiveness of remedial intervention across the policy prioritisation categories identified in this paper.

- **Disadvantaged women’s voices: inclusion in policy development**
 - Finally, across all of the policy prioritisation areas identified here, government should commit to providing for more meaningful stakeholder engagement with disadvantaged women across all

⁷⁶ McKnight et al., op. cit., p.3.

implicated policy development, monitoring and review processes, ensuring their voices are explicitly heard and their perspectives, needs and interests properly recognised and accommodated.