

Research



Women's Regional
Consortium

Quarterly Zine
Quarter 1
2024



INTRODUCING OUR QUARTERLY ZINE RESEARCH EDITION

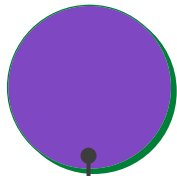
By Megan McClure Botha | WRDA

The Consortium and many of the Consortium partners produce primary research as part of our work. In this edition of our quarterly zine we take an in-depth look at that research in action.

The cost of living crisis continues to deepen and is exacerbating the existing crisis of women in poverty. Our first piece looks at the work being done by the Women's Budget Group and other Consortium partners to provide research on this issue, disseminate it, and campaign based on it. The second piece is a deep dive into the impact of our research on poverty. The final piece offers an example of how research informs our consultation responses.

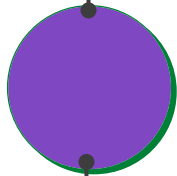
We hope you find the information contained in this edition useful as we continue to ensure a voice for women from disadvantaged and rural areas.

IN THIS EDITION



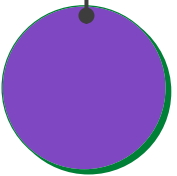
NIWBG

women in poverty: a key policy priority for our government



Women's Support Network

Women's Regional Consortium Research in Action!



WRDA

WPG NI Response to Foundational Review of Civil Legal Services



WOMEN IN POVERTY: A KEY POLICY PRIORITY FOR OUR GOVERNMENT

By Alexandra Brennan | NI Women's Budget Group

The NIWBG, along with the NI Anti-Poverty Network (NIAPN), hosted an event in Derry~Londonderry last week highlighting the need to make women in poverty a key policy priority for our government. The event was well-attended by civil society workers, council officers and members of the public, demonstrating the interest in this issue and its relevance to the Derry~Londonderry area. Becca Bor from NIAPN chaired the event and began by reiterating the importance of eradicating poverty in order to achieve gender equality.

The first presentation that followed Becca's opening was from Lisa Wilson of the Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI). She outlined the current budgetary situation and what led to it - from stagnation in resource and capital spend since 2008/2009, to the Devolution Deal with the return to government in February 2024, to the most recent Fiscal Framework. The Framework included the move to a £124 spend per head funding floor with 5% Barnett Consequentials on top of that figure. However, that floor is disputed, with some arguing that it should be £127 or £130. Lisa emphasised that despite the Framework, the 24/25 Budget remains challenging as there is no additional funding to mitigate the previous underfunding and the UK fiscal stance has not changed. It is crucial that during this constrained budget period, decision-makers keep the reduction of poverty and its gendered impacts at the forefront of their minds.

Bethany Moore, of Foyle Network Foundation, talked about the work of her organisation and their experience combating poverty in the community. She highlighted that FNF has seen the increase of foodbank usage (11% in NI, which is the highest increase in the UK) with 947 first time referrals this year. Bethany reported that coming out of the pandemic, Northern Ireland fell from the best to the worst for women's economic outcomes. This research is key in demonstrating that the longer decision-makers wait to address poverty, the worse real people's situations will get.

Rayna Downey of The Women's Centre Derry reiterated this point, highlighting the role of women's centres in supporting women experiencing poverty. However, Rayna noted that the roles of women's centres have drastically changed since the worsening cost-of-living crisis. Women's centres used to be for training, learning new skills, functioning as a social space. Now, women come because, 'they need help with surviving'. Centres are often first responders to the most vulnerable of women, yet their roles are at risk due to unstable funding.

It is crucial that during this constrained budget period, decision-makers keep the reduction of poverty and its gendered impacts at the forefront of their minds.

The issue of women's poverty is multitudinal. Due to the lack of intersectional analysis and siloed working patterns, we see women and other minoritised groups repeatedly bear the brunt of economic impacts. The discussion in the room reflected this with many frustrated at the inaction of decision-makers. The final presentation, which touched on gender budgeting and how it can be used as an anti-poverty measure, provided an alternative to the current economic process in Northern Ireland. The participants were encouraged to think about the budget as a tool to bring about equality as opposed to being something separate from equality.

It is essential that poverty and its gendered impacts are dealt with urgently at every level of decision-making.

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WOMEN'S REGIONAL CONSORTIUM RESEARCH IN ACTION!

By Siobhán Harding | Women's Support Network

In June last year the Women's Regional Consortium published its largest piece of research with 250 women across Northern Ireland. This research asked women about the impact of the Cost of Living Crisis on their lives including the impacts on their health and wellbeing, debts and savings, the impacts on their children and caring responsibilities and how they were coping with the Crisis. We did this through a series of focus group sessions and questionnaires with local women across the network of Women's Centres, Consortium partners and women's groups.

The findings were stark highlighting increasing levels of financial hardship and poverty being experienced by local women as a result of rising prices for the most essential items. The results showed that 91% of the women we spoke to said they were having difficulty paying their bills and 78% stating they felt cold or hungry or both as a result of cost of living increases. The findings can best summarised by this quote from one of the women who took part in the research:

"We're not living, we're just existing."

A key part of Consortium research work is to ensure that the voices of women are heard and amplified. The research report was full of quotes from the women who took part and were central to sharing the impacts and in forming the recommendations arising from the report.

“There are times I’ve went three or four days with very little to eat, maybe grab an apple just so I have something in my stomach and I’m not going to bed with hunger pains and growling in my stomach.”

Women are often described as the ‘shock absorbers’ of poverty in the home going without food, heat and clothing to protect their children and other family members from poverty. We heard examples of this shock absorbing behaviour over and over again in this research with much of it happening behind the four walls of the home and out of sight of policy makers. The resulting impacts on women’s mental and physical health was also evident. The aim of this research was to bring these experiences out into the open and to make recommendations for change to improve women’s financial situations, health and wellbeing.

“My wee one is on Aptamil formula milk, it’s now £16 a tin. I was going without food to make sure she had it. I was eating dry cereal just so she could get the formula she needed. The stress I feel when I’m getting down to the bottom of her milk tin and thinking will I have enough to get her her milk.”

What was evident from the research and quotes was that the cost of food and the ability to access food, particularly healthy food, was a significant issue for the women who took part. Food shopping was the bill most frequently reported as being difficult to pay by 75% of the women. Many of the conversations revolved around the rising costs of essentials including milk, formula milk for babies and fresh fruit and vegetables. This meant that women were often forced to buy cheaper, healthier food so that they were able to feed their children and families.

“I went shopping the other day and it was £30 for one bag with about six items in it. We’re all eating chicken strips and chips all the time, I can’t afford to get anything else. We’re having the same things all the time because they’re cheap.”

During this research we heard from a number of the women about missing out on entitlement to the NHS Healthy Start Scheme. NHS Healthy Start is a Government Scheme which provides a pre-paid card to help those on low incomes buy healthy food and milk and get free vitamin supplements. If eligible you can get:

- £4.25 each week from the 10th week of your pregnancy
- £8.50 each week for children from birth to one
- £4.25 each week for children between one and four



The research highlighted that Northern Ireland has the lowest awareness levels of this Scheme at only 52.7% compared to Wales at 70.3% and England at 66.2%. Some of the women also highlighted how the current levels of the Scheme were not enough to cope with rising prices for these items. Evidence from the women on these issues led to a recommendation in our research that the Healthy Start Scheme should be increased in line with inflation and that those who are entitled should be automatically enrolled onto the Scheme to ensure that no one who is entitled to this help will miss out.

"I didn't realise about Healthy Start. I was entitled from early in my pregnancy but I can't get it backdated now. No one told me I could have been getting extra money."

"I only found out about Healthy Start with my third child, I missed out on it for my first two kids. My health visitor only told me when my third child was one."



Following the launch of the research paper, Ulster University provided some funding to do some targeted work around the recommendations in the research paper. We decided that given the very low levels of awareness of Healthy Start, the importance of this Scheme to low-income women and children and the fact that it targets healthy food which women were struggling to access, that this should be the focus of our work with this funding.

This led to a collaboration between Atlas Women's Centre, Ulster University and the Women's Regional Consortium which resulted in a short video on the NHS Healthy Start Scheme showing who is eligible, what help is provided through the Scheme and how to apply. The video was produced to try and raise awareness of the Scheme in Northern Ireland and to make sure that less people miss out on this important help. It is brilliantly voiced by Rachel, Lauren and Rebecca from Atlas Women's Centre who all benefited from the Healthy Start Scheme and provided vital input into how women could best find out about Healthy Start. We are very grateful to Ulster University Applied Social & Policy Sciences for the funding to do this work, to Hannah Miller for the beautiful illustrations and Dan Farley Design for the animation work.

We continue to work with healthcare professionals and other stakeholders to discuss awareness levels of the Scheme and to identify areas where the video and resources can be further shared to increase uptake. We recently met with the Royal College of Midwives in Northern Ireland and will work to take forwards their suggestions on how to get the message out to those who might benefit from the Scheme.

TAKE ACTION - Reader a final point of action for you!



Siobhán Harding, Women's Regional Consortium and Dr Alexandra Chapman, Ulster University with Anne Wilson, National Officer for the Royal College of Midwives, Northern Ireland sharing information about the NHS Healthy Start Scheme

Please share information on Healthy Start including the video as widely as possible to try and encourage uptake of this important Scheme in Northern Ireland – see links to resources below.

You can read the Women's Regional Consortium research on Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis and a range of shorter summaries across the main issues reported in the research [here](#).

You can watch the video on the NHS Healthy Start Scheme produced by Ulster University, the Women's Regional Consortium and voiced by women from Atlas Women's Centre (supported by the Department of Health) [here](#).

Further resources on the NHS Healthy Start Scheme are also available [here](#) including promotional materials (leaflets, posters and social media graphics).

Survey - Civil Legal Aid

DoJ are consulting on reforming Civil Legal Aid. Help us respond by sharing your experiences and views.

<https://shorturl.at/OTMYX>



WPG NI RESPONSE TO FOUNDATIONAL REVIEW OF CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES

By Elaine Crory | WRDA

The position of the Women's Policy Group NI is that access to justice is a fundamental right, and there is a duty on the state to ensure access to it, even if that means expense. At present, legal aid is available but requires an exacting test to secure it, may require a financial contribution that can be an impossible financial burden, and even after that it is difficult to secure a good solicitor who will accept legal aid and can deliver a quality and sensitive service.

Because of women's economic disadvantage in comparison to men, and because the kinds of cases where civil legal aid may be needed, particularly matters related to family separation, solicitors to help secure protection orders in cases of domestic abuse, and similar kinds of cases, this issue has a distinct impact on women and especially on women who are survivors of VAWG.

For these reasons, we believe that widening eligibility, reducing financial burdens, and securing good quality services are imperative.

In the last number of years, the WPG has carried out a variety of pieces of research that feed directly into the issue raised here; both access to justice and quality of experience in the justice system. We also work closely with Women's Aid who have carried out extensive focus groups with their service users in preparation for this, and it is clear to us that reform is needed.

The UK also has obligations in international law to recognise gender based violence against women as a specific human rights issue. As a State Party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UK is required to take action on domestic abuse, which the Convention defines as a barrier to women and girls enjoying their full human rights.²⁰ The overall aim of CEDAW is to strengthen gender equality, and the CEDAW Committee has highlighted the importance of action on domestic abuse in their Concluding Observations to all recent periodic reports submitted by the UK

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The UK is also a member of the Council of Europe, which integrates gender equality as one of its policy goals. The Council has adopted Standards for Gender Equality, which set out a list of measures to be taken across policy areas, including violence against women. The Standards state that 'Violence against women is one of the most serious violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and an obstacle to the enjoyment of those rights and freedoms. Furthermore, violence against women is a waste of capacities and resources for economic and social development; it is also one of the means by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men and is, therefore, a decisive impediment to the achievement of gender equality'. In 2011, the Council adopted the Istanbul Convention of preventing violence against women and combating domestic violence, which sets out clear standards for states to put in place. The convention includes an extensive pillar of protection and support for victims and survivors, and emphasises that states are required to provide financial support for victims and survivors, for all types of violence including stalking and domestic abuse, as well as sexual harassment and violence. Compliance with requirements is essential to enable states to ratify the Convention; the UK ratified the Convention in 2022 and the Council of Europe expert Committee on violence against women is currently undertaking a baseline assessment of the UK, expected to be finalised by the end of 2024. This baseline assessment will set out recommendations for the UK, which are binding on the UK as a member of the Council of Europe and the European Convention on Human Rights, and will be used to assess UK performance over future years.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) places an obligation on the UK as a State Party to ensure that discrimination against women is prohibited in law and that action to prevent and address discrimination is taken at the policy level.²³ This includes violence against women and girls, and the CEDAW Committee has raised issues in relation to Northern Ireland, as outlined above.

This is an excerpt from the [WPG NI Response to Foundational Review of Civil Legal Services](#).

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