

# Women's Support Network

## Mapping of Local Support for Women in Northern Ireland

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## The Labyrinth Project

Women often have a range of issues in their lives including Violence Against Women & Girls (VAWG), financial, employment and legal issues, but it can be hard for them to access the support they need across multiple agencies. There is a lack of joined-up, holistic, women-centred services despite many groups and organisations doing good work with and for women. The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the impact of these issues. With partners across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the Labyrinth Project aims to support women's spaces and services to help them, and the women they support, to emerge stronger from the damage that the pandemic is having on women's lives.

Funded by a grant from the Department for Digital, Culture, Music and Sport, the Labyrinth Project is contributing to system change for women by building capacity and forging stronger networks of support and shared learning locally and nationally. It focuses on education and training, awareness raising, building self-confidence, expansion of choices, increased access to and control over resources, actions to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality. The Project will also improve access to help with finances, debt and legal rights.

The Labyrinth Project is formed of the three strands below:

- Local Capacity Building – strengthening the women's sector at a local level by mapping the support currently available, building networks and increasing the influence of the women's sector on local strategy and decision making.
- The Empowering Women Fund grants scheme - supporting organisations that are led by and for women to build their capacity and develop innovative ways of empowering women in their local area.
- National Women's Centre for Excellence – building a collection of knowledge, evidence, resources and tools based on experience by and for organisations within and supporting the women's sector.

## Women's Support Network

[www.wsn.org.uk](http://www.wsn.org.uk)

The Women's Support Network (WSN) is an umbrella organisation providing support to the community-based women's sector e.g. women's centres, groups, projects and organisations. WSN provides information, resources, training and direct support to relieve poverty, advance education and safeguard health for women in Northern Ireland, particularly in areas of disadvantage. WSN actively campaigns, lobbies, carries out research and supports funding bids on key issues affecting women, namely health, poverty, childcare and education.

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# 1. Introduction

## Purpose of the mapping

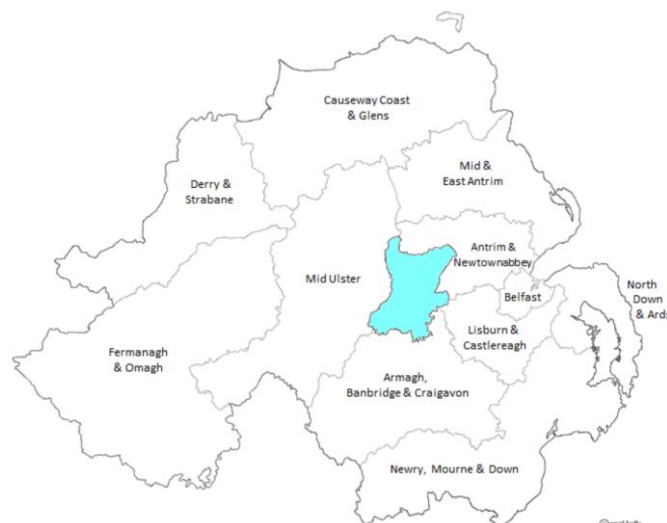
Women's Support Network has undertaken a mapping report around the services and support available for women who experience complex needs in Northern Ireland.

This is carried out as part of the Labyrinth project for the following aims:

- To gather intelligence on the range of services available for women who experience multiple disadvantage and intersecting complex needs.
- To identify specific services in the areas of VAWG, employment, financial and legal support
- To identify gaps in provision and barriers to access including for particular groups of women
- To explore the extent to which services are 'joined up' across the area and across different issues

## What the mapping covers

This mapping exercise covers all of Northern Ireland which is made up of eleven council areas. The exercise focuses on the provision of services for women in the community through the fourteen established women's centres, local community groups and groups supporting women impacted by violence and sexual assault.



Map by Conal Kelly

## How the mapping was undertaken

An online survey was created to capture the data and shared throughout identified and established women's service providers. This was shared with WSN networks, Women's Aid & community groups. This was followed up with telephone interviews and in-person meetings. Site visits took place to new and emerging groups, this was effective in drilling into the information provided and teasing out the provision and barriers for women. Site visits were severely hampered by Covid restrictions and is ongoing.

The Women's Centres are independently funded through many Government departments and are the only stand-alone service provision specifically for women. During the Covid pandemic many of these centres had to halt their normal services and stood in to provide childcare for hospital and key workers. The demands of Covid meant engagement was much more difficult particularly with statutory agencies who continue to work from home and have not returned to normal activities as our executive remains with the advice to work from home. During the mapping exercise there was a consultation on Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy as NI has one of the highest VAWG statistics in Europe. Through the Women's Policy Group, we designed and launched an online questionnaire to gather the views of women to ensure the lived experience of women was included.

Engagement with Women's Aid refuges across NI was through online and telephone interviews, as capacity for in-person interviews was restricted due to covid and staff resources experiencing high demand. Zoom interviews through The NI Regional Women's Consortium, Women's Policy Group, Women's Centres managers and Women's Aid were effective in gathering data.

We have a strong independent community and voluntary sector and engaged with the 14 established Women's Centres, 6 ethnic minorities groups, 6 network organisations, 2 LGBTQ+ organisations, 3 Trade Unions and 4 community organisations.

An overview of the organisations is detailed in Section 3 below.

## 2. Local Context

According to 2011 census (2021 census results not released until 24 May 2022), Northern Ireland's ethnic population showed that those designated as white were the major group making up 98.21% of the total population. The remaining 1.79% represents 0.35% Chinese, 0.34% Indian, 0.06% Pakistani, 0.03% Bangladeshi, 0.13% Black African, 0.28% are other Asian and 0.13% are 'Other'. Statistics about National Identity, 39.89% are British, 25.26% are Irish, 20.94% are Northern Irish. 88.84% are Northern Ireland residents, 3.57% are England residents, 0.85% are Scotland residents, 0.14% are Wales resident, 2.09% are from Republic of Ireland and 1.99% are from other regions.

The 2021 census will be very different, and there have been big changes in the ethnic population that will reflect in the number of groups and organisations that are now established in NI from non-white backgrounds.

Districts	Population(2001)	Population(2011)	Population (2020)
Northern Ireland	1,688,838	1,814,318	1,895,510
Antrim and Newtownabbey	128,760	138,651	143,756
Ards and North Down	149,559	156,943	162,056
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	176,014	200,298	217,232
Belfast	328,695	333,895	342,560
Causeway Coast and Glens	131,374	140,907	144,943
Derry City and Strabane	143,810	148,191	151,109
Fermanagh and Omagh	105,751	113,501	117,337
Lisburn and Castlereagh	124,585	135,280	146,452
Mid and East Antrim	127,452	135,365	139,443
Mid Ulster	119,112	139,011	148,953
Newry, Mourne and Down	153,726	172,276	181,669

Findings from NI Crime Survey 2015/16 estimate that:

- 12.1% of people aged 16-64 have experienced at least one form of domestic violence, by a partner, since age 16, with women (15.1%) displaying a higher prevalence rate than men (8.4%).
- That around one-in-twenty-five adults (4.3%) experienced at least one form of partner violence and abuse within the last three years, a similar proportion to that observed in both NICS 2013/14 (5.2%) and 2014/15 (5.0%).
- At 5.9%, women were over twice as likely as men (2.5%) to have been victims of domestic violence, by a partner, in the last three years, a gender difference that is

reflected across each of the three separate offence groups examined; non-physical abuse (4.4% v 2.4%); threats (2.0% v 0.2%); and force (2.5% v 0.9%).

Women’s Policy Group, of which WSN is a partner, carried out an online survey in January 22 on Violence Against Women and Girls that gathered 1065 responses providing the following details:

- 97.2% of women think that Northern Ireland should have a strategy to tackle men's violence against women and girls.
- 83% of women have been impacted by men's violence against women and girls but only 21.4% reported this to the police.
- 77.4% of women who reported this violence to the police did not find it useful.
- 89.7% of women believe Northern Ireland has a problem with attitudes of sexism and misogyny.
- 80.8% of women believe Northern Ireland has a problem with rape myths and rape culture.
- 87.4% of women believe Northern Ireland has a problem with victim-blaming.
- 91.2% of women think that Northern Ireland has a problem with men's violence against women and girls.

These findings were presented to the Justice Committee to inform the consultation for the development of the first ever Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy for Northern Ireland.

The fourteen Women’s Centres detailed in Section 3 below are mainly located in areas of very high social and economic disadvantage.

**Table 1: Location of Women’s Centres**

Centre	Geographical Area	Overall SOA Ranking (NISRA, 2017)	Band
Shankill Women’s Centre	Greater Belfast	6	0-10%
Women’s Centre Derry	Derry	26	0-10%
Chrysalis Women’s Centre	Craigavon	55	0-10%
Windsor Women’s Centre	Greater Belfast	69	0-10%
Footprints Women’s Centre	Greater Belfast	72	0-10%
Waterside Women’s Centre	Derry	101	10 – 20%
Falls Women’s Centre	Greater Belfast	105	10 – 20%
Strathfoyle Women’s Centre	Derry	110	10 – 20%
Greenway Women’s Centre	Greater Belfast	201	20-30%
Ballybeen Women’s Centre	Greater Belfast	246	20-30%
Atlas Women’s Centre	Lisburn	299	20-30%
First Steps Women’s Centre	Dungannon	348	30-40%

Kilcooley Womens Centre	Bangor	415	40-50%
Magherafelt Women's Centre	Magherafelt	484	50-60%



### 3. Findings

#### What support is currently available for women in the areas?

There is a wide network of women's sector organisations across Northern Ireland, many delivering frontline services for local women and children. The core services delivered through these organisations are training and education, childcare, advice, counselling, advocacy and support. These groups and centres are supported by a range of network organisations and groups in both urban and rural areas.

#### **Regional Network Organisations**

**The Women's Support Network (WSN)** is an umbrella organisation providing support to the community-based women's sector and in particular advocates on behalf of the fourteen dedicated women's centres across Northern Ireland. WSN provides information, support, resources, research and training to support these organisations in the delivery of services that increase opportunities for women that work towards the relief of poverty, address social exclusion, advance education and safeguard health for women in Northern Ireland, particularly in areas of disadvantage. WSN actively campaigns, lobbies, carries out research and supports funding bids on key issues affecting women, namely health, poverty, childcare, and education. WSN collates the views of women to inform policy development and articulates concerns and areas of need to funders, government departments, statutory organisations and elected representatives highlighting local key issues that impact directly on women in identified areas.

**Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)** is a feminist membership organisation that was established in 1983. WRDA's work covers lobbying, policy, Good Relations, health promotion and training. WRDA's vision is of a fair and equal society where women are empowered and are a visible force for change and influence in all areas of life. They take a participative, grassroots approach to this work – all women have the right to be involved in policy decision-making and we aim to amplify the voices of the women who engage with the women's sector.

**Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)** was established in September 2006 'to promote and support rural women in rural Northern Ireland. They are a membership-based organisation whose vision is for an equitable society where rural women are visible, influential and valued and they work to advance the participation and recognition of rural women.

**Women's Platform** (formerly NIWEP, the NI Women's European Platform) is a membership organisation working to promote the implementation of international human rights standards in Northern Ireland, and in particular the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in line with commitments the UK has made to international human rights treaties. Established in 1988 as the Northern Ireland link

to the European Women's Lobby, Women's Platform also represents women and girls in Northern Ireland at the European and international level, including at the UN. Women's Platform is in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN.

## **The 14 Women's Centres**

### **Falls Women's Centre**

Falls Women's Centre/Ionad Mhná na bhFál was established in 1982 to support women and families in the mainly nationalist, disadvantaged area of West Belfast at the height of the 'Troubles'. Providing training and education programmes, childcare, counselling, advice and support the Centre now provides services for women from eighteen different nationalities.

### **Footprints Women's Centre**

Footprints Women's Centre has provided services for women within the Colin Neighbourhood of West Belfast since 1991. Responding to the needs of local women and their families, Footprints has filled recognised gaps and offers a relaxing and welcoming environment, where local women are encouraged and supported to build self-esteem, confidence and develop skills through participation in the range of programmes and activities on offer.

### **Greenway Women's Centre**

Since its establishment in 1985, Greenway Women's Centre has been committed to providing vital services to meet the needs of women within the local community of East Belfast and beyond. Greenway Women's Centre exists to provide women within the Cregagh Estate, Castlereagh Borough and Greater Belfast area with positive opportunities for development by breaking down the barriers which prevent women's full participation in society.

### **Shankill Women's Centre**

Shankill Women's Centre established in 1987, is located in a disadvantaged ward in North Belfast. It arose because of an expressed local need for women specific education, support and training. After many years of lobbying and fundraising the Centre has finally began work on their own dedicated Centre.

### **Windsor Women's Centre**

Windsor Women's Centre has been operating since 1990 and is the only Women's Centre in the South Belfast area. The centre works within a community development framework to develop and promote equality of opportunity and champion practices and policies to better the lives of women and their families.

### **Women's Centre Derry**

Women's Centre Derry established in 1997 is a safe and welcoming space for women and women's organisations in the North West of Northern Ireland situated beside the Guild Hall in the city side of Derry. It is a dynamic organisation, challenging inequality, increasing awareness, support women's life choices, providing a wide range of programmes and quality on-site childcare.

### **Waterside Women's Centre**

The Waterside Women's Centre was established in 1994 as a direct response from local women who saw the absence of a safe neutral space for women in the Waterside area of Londonderry/Derry. The centre empowers women to make their own choices by providing and promoting education, training and information in a neutral environment for all women, supported with quality on-site child-care.

### **Strathfoyle Women's Activity Group**

Strathfoyle Women's Activity Group was incorporated in 2002 in the sprawling Strathfoyle estate to the west of Derry/Londonderry and provides a wide and varied program of activities and events to enable women to access opportunities for learning and development in a flexible and supportive environment, while doing this providing childcare focused on the needs of the child, taking account of the needs of women from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences.

### **ATLAS Women's Centre**

Lisburn Women's Centre was founded in 1994 and changed to Atlas Women's Centre in 2002. Atlas stands for Adult Training Learning and Support with the centre delivering these services supported by childcare along with counselling, advice and guidance to the most vulnerable, disadvantaged and isolated women and families in the Lisburn and surrounding areas.

### **Ballybeen Women's Centre**

Ballybeen Women's Centre delivers quality services in an area of low and weak community infrastructure. It was established in 1984 to address the developmental needs of women within a community objectively defined as disadvantaged and had developed expertise in the design and delivery of education and training programmes, health promotion programmes, cultural diversity programmes, family and childcare programmes as well as advice and support.

### **First Steps Women's Centre**

First Steps Women's Centre (FSWC) established in 1998 provides a unique service to women in Mid-Ulster. Based in Dungannon, the Centre provides education and training,

support and guidance, along with exceptional opportunities and friendship to women across Mid-Ulster. Up to 300 women per year access training across a wide range of vocational areas which is funded under the European Social Fund (ESF) by Department for the Economy and Department for Communities.

### **Magherafelt Womens' Group**

Magherafelt Women's Group was established in 1992 and provides children and adults in the Mid Ulster area with a safe and stimulating environment to promote educational, personal and social development opportunities

### **Chrysalis Women's Centre**

Chrysalis Women's Centre was established in 1992 to provide opportunities for women and children in the Craigavon area, a network of sprawling estates that when build in the 1980s was to become a 'new town' however this did not materialise and instead turned into an area of high deprivation with many social problems. The centre provides education and training programmes that runs throughout the year, counselling, childcare and a community garden, all designed to support women to develop the skills knowledge and experience necessary to access further training and employment.

### **Kilcooley Women's Centre**

Kilcooley Women's Centre, is based in Bangor and has provided services for women in North Down since 1995. As the only women's centre serving Ards/North Down and unique in Co Down, where possible as well as local services the centre offers outreach training to smaller towns and villages in the Borough. On 2nd June 2017, HM Queen Elizabeth announced in the London Gazette that she had awarded the centre the 'Queens Award for Voluntary Service' in recognition of the service to the community from 1995. Kilcooley Women's Centre is a key provider of training, health awareness, childcare and young women's activities and leads on community based education in the area.

### **Women's Regional Consortium NI**

WSN is a member of The Women's Regional Consortium which is made up 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 working 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 other six organisations are:

- Training for Women Network (TWN) a membership organisation established in 1996, for the promotion of women's training and development, through policy, training, networking and education.

- Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- Women's TEC established in 1993 provides training for women in non-traditional skills across Northern Ireland.
- Women's Centre Derry (WCD) established in 1997, a safe and welcoming space for women and women's organisations in the Northwest.
- Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN) was established in January 1994 to support women and women's groups throughout the Northwest.

## VAWG Organisations

**The Women's Aid Federation NI - WAFNI** is the regional umbrella membership organisation for eight Women's Aid organisations across Northern Ireland. The member groups offer a range of specialist services to women who have experienced domestic and sexual violence. The work of the Federation as the regional umbrella group is focused on: Women's rights as human rights; Policy, consultation; raising public awareness of violence against women and providing preventative education and training

**Women's Aid, Armagh & Down**, covers an approximate population of 700K, which is mainly rural, incorporating the city of Armagh with a population of just over 200k. They provide safety and support for women and children who experience domestic abuse, ensure their voices are heard and their needs are met. They challenge attitudes and beliefs that perpetuates domestic / sexual abuse and provide training and awareness raising sessions with external agencies and advocacy and campaigning for the rights of women and children who are affected by domestic abuse.

**Women's Aid ABCLN** provides confidential support, information and emergency accommodation for women and children who are affected by domestic abuse across Antrim, Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey. They provide emergency accommodation for women and children in refuge and self-contained flats. Specialised staff on hand, one to one support, practical assistance and group work for women affected by domestic abuse, specialised services and support for children and young people and interpreter services are available.

**Women's Aid, Belfast & Lisburn** provides a range of support services to women and children experiencing domestic abuse. These support services include emergency accommodation, specialist counselling, group work, personal development programmes, and one-to-one support. They campaign for legislative change in Northern Ireland and seek to raise awareness of the impact of domestic abuse with various online and social campaigns. They work in Partnership with the PSNI, PBNI, DOJ, Health & Social Services Trusts, Social Services Gateway Teams and are part of the Belfast Area Domestic & Sexual Violence and Abuse Partnership, which is also made up of a range of statutory and voluntary agencies and organisations, including Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Cara-

Friend, Housing Executive, Men's Advisory Project, PSNI, PBNI, the Education Authority Belfast and more.

**Fermanagh Women's Aid** provide support safe temporary accommodation for women and their children, young people and vulnerable adults who are, may be, or have been, experiencing domestic, sexual or gender-based violence or abuse. Promoting a range of services such as information, support centres, confidential services, counselling, outreach, court support, training and advocacy. They also provide information and advice for those affected by domestic, sexual or gender-based violence or abuse and referral to relevant support agencies. They aim to advance education on violence against women and girls, including trafficking and exploitation, and its effects, and to relieve those in need by promoting its prevention and the protection of those affected.

**Foyle Women's Aid** offers secure, supported, short term accommodation, specialist community support services, personal development programmes, DV awareness, education programme in schools, support in communities and work directly with children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse. They provide information & support to any woman to has to attend court on an issue related to domestic violence e.g., Non-Molestation Orders, Occupancy Orders, Residency Orders, Child Contact, act as a witness in assault and rape cases, separation and divorce.

**North Down and Ards Women's Aid** provides a range of free support services to women and children affected by domestic and sexual violence, from education, awareness, personal development. They provide support and information on rights and accompaniment to solicitors and court.

**Omagh Women's Aid** provides emergency accommodation, specialist support and raising awareness. They work with women, children, and young people, to give them a voice and ensure they inform all aspects of service development and delivery. They provide trauma-informed support services and deliver preventative education programmes in schools and community settings to promote healthy non-abusive relationships and share key safeguarding messages. They monitor, influence, and respond to government policy and legislation as a Subject Matter Expert, giving a voice to survivors of domestic abuse, and work in partnership, sharing our expertise with all relevant agencies to ensure a joined-up response to domestic abuse.

### **Ethnic Minority Groups**

**Migrant Centre NI (MCNI)** was established in 2010 and constituted as a registered charity in 2012 to protect the rights of migrant workers in Northern Ireland, eliminate barriers against migrant workers, tackle racism, advance education, and raise public awareness. MCNI has three offices across NI, in Belfast, Lurgan, and Derry-Londonderry. MCNI services and programmes include EU Settlement Scheme immigration advice, hate crime, victim support and advocacy, financial health and wellbeing advice services including

benefits advice, and the administration of the Comic Relief “BAME COVID-19 Recovery and Relief” grant schemes for all of NI. Migrant Centre NI advocates for a more just immigration system and for the rights of migrants and ethnic minorities in NI through policy, lobbying, and advocacy work informed by our service provision.

**The Northern Ireland Refugees and Asylum Seekers Women Association (Bomoko NI)** was created by and for refugee and asylum-seeking women. Bomoko NI is emerging in response to the needs of refugee and asylum seeker women living in Northern Ireland. They provide specialist signposting for advice services, education & training, mental health and wellbeing and employment opportunities. They aim to cultivate social integration, encourage racial harmony and promote cultural diversity through events, outreach and training.

**The Northwest Migrants Forum (NWMF)** is a network of individuals working together to tackle racial inequality and prejudice. Their fundamental goal is supporting and advising members of black and minority ethnic (BAME) communities who reside in Northern Ireland, to protect minority ethnic rights & support integration based on equitable diversity and respect. The organisation drives discussion and action on themes relevant to the needs of people from minority ethnic background, raising awareness of rights, public institutions & services, building capacity to influence & challenge discrimination, inequality, racism and hate crime through a variety of activities. They offer support and advice through a variety of means including running funded events and projects that will educate participants, from BAME and traditional communities, and encourage them to challenge negative perceptions and policies that affect them while also gaining skills and confidence to make change happen.

**Anaka Women’s Collective** are a group of women who use their collective skills to educate, support, advocate and celebrate each other. They provide mutual support and signposting for women and host activities throughout Belfast, promoting leadership and celebrating diversity.

**SWA, Somalian Women’s Association** provides support and mutual aid for Somalian families. They share information and promote cultural activities and provide advocacy and signposting. They are totally volunteer based and work closely with Red Cross to support refugee and asylum seekers.

**House of Africa** represents the interests of a number of African diaspora organisations and individuals to provide a community hub and facilitate the positive integration of African families into NI society, without prejudice to status, tribe, gender, nationality or faith. They organise volunteering opportunities, support, networking on African issues, such as community development and family support with cultural events, interfaith meeting. They have a leadership forum bringing together leaders from different African communities to discuss the issue that they face and facilitate ongoing dialogue for community representatives.



## **LGBTQ+ Organisations**

**HERe NI** (previously LASI), established in 2000, is a regional organisation that works across all areas of Northern Ireland (NI) and the boarder counties to support lesbian and bisexual (LB) women and their families. We advocate for and support LB women and their families and improve the lives of LB women across Northern Ireland. We do this in lots of different ways; through providing information; peer support; facilitating training; lobbying government and agencies on LB women's issues; offering a community space for meeting and much more. HERe NI is the only women focused organisation within the NI LGBTQ+ sector.

**Cara-Friend** has been serving the LGBTQ+ community in Northern Ireland for over 40 years founded in 1974, we work with young LGBTQ+ people aged 12–25. We provide regional LGBTQ+ youth groups across Northern Ireland, one-to-one support for individuals, LGBTQ+ awareness training for professionals and volunteers working in a variety of different areas, community development, the LGBT Switchboard, the LGBTQ+ Inclusive Schools Programme and the Domestic and Sexual Violence project, supporting LGBTI women and girls across the region.

## **Trade Unions**

**UNISON** is a public service union in Northern Ireland representing over 45,000 members and is the largest trade union in the UK with over 1.3 million members. UNISON membership includes public service workers in health and social care; education and higher education services; the library service; local government; youth justice; private companies providing public services and the community and voluntary sector. UNISON is one of the largest organisations of women on the island with nearly 38,000 (82%) women members. the Regional Women's Committee NI work with the C&V sector on issues such as abortion, menopause, domestic violence, recognising these are all workplace issues. They support women in prison through a pathway's projects, through visits, support and advocacy.

**Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA)** is the largest trade union in Northern Ireland representing over 41,500 members employed across the whole of the public services in organisations such as the Northern Ireland Civil Service and its Agencies, Local Government, Education Authority, the Health Trusts, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive as well as a host of Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs). NIPSA also represents a significant number of members in the Voluntary Sector.

**Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU):** The ICTU is the trade union federation, and largest civil society organisation, on the island of Ireland, representing some 800,000 members, 200,000 of whom live and work in Northern Ireland. Just over half of trade union



members are women. The Congress seeks to achieve a just society - one which recognises the rights of all workers and citizens to enjoy the prosperity and fulfilment which leads to a good quality of life. Quality of life embraces not just material well-being, but freedom of choice to engage in the arts, culture and all aspects of civic life. This vision applies in the context of Ireland, Europe and the wider world and challenges the existing economic order.

### **Additional Groups and Organisations**

GRACE Women's Development Limited (formally known as Ardoyne Women's Group) is an organisation founded in the 1984 as an initiative of local women who identified the need for a safe, secure and nurturing environment where women and girls could meet to socialise, network and learn. The core principles of GRACE Women's Development Limited are good relations, community development and equality throughout their network of services, projects and facilities which are open to all residents within North Belfast.

The Lenadoon Women's Group was established in 1996 and is committed to supporting local women, their children and their families. We provide a range of services that directly meet the complex and often multi-intervention needs of women across the Lenadoon area and address the issues they experience on a daily basis. In doing so the group has achieved considerable success and significantly made life changing impacts on women's lives and livelihoods and continue to do so on a daily basis.

Reclaim the Agenda (RTA) is a feminist coalition that connects and mobilises women to promote feminist activism through education, campaigning, and celebration. RTA want a place where all women are safe and secure to reach their potential and have an active role in society and all women can be active change makers and have equal access to power. Through RTA women are striving for, a life free from poverty & discrimination. To have healthcare services that meet particular needs and a life free from domestic and sexual violence and abuse. To live in a world where women are equally represented as decision makers and have access to good, affordable and flexible provision.

Belfast Feminist Network is a community collective of feminist activists. Established in April 2010, the group is committed to providing an open and inclusive space for discussions of gender inequality in Northern Ireland.

Alliance for Choice (AfC) believes everyone who needs an abortion should have free, safe and legal access in their own country, without stigma; set up in 1996, we campaign for barrier-free access to abortion, comprehensive, unbiased sex education for young people and an end to the harassment of people using reproductive health services.

Rape Crisis Northern Ireland is a non-governmental organisation and support service for anyone aged 18 and over who has experienced rape or serious sexual assault in adulthood. Within a framework of equality and human rights, RCNI provides emotional support to

victims and survivors, their families, friends, and the wider community. This work ensures everyone can live free from the causes and consequences of sexual abuse. RCNI work ethically to challenge and prevent rape, sexual violence and associated myths. RCNI empower by providing support, education, information and advocacy. The service is based on equality, empowerment, respect, trust and commitment to good practice for survivors.

Raise Your Voice is a project that seeks to tackle sexual harassment and violence in communities across Northern Ireland. The goal is to create true cultural change in order to tackle the root causes of these behaviours and empower people to act to change this in their own lives.

Northern Ireland has a strong network of Women's Centres across rural and urban settings, however over the last 12 years the resources have been drastically reduced, meaning these centres are limited in what they can provide, and mainly focus on childcare, counselling, benefits advice, courses relating to mental health and wellbeing. During Covid many of the women's centres were forced to close their in-person services and provide childcare provision for key workers and vulnerable people. Guidance on re-opening was not provided and centres adapted the educational guidelines for training and childcare provision. Much of the work focused on supporting the food and fuel packages and supporting mental health needs. The return to full services remains limited and patchy as many centres and organisations continue to deal with staff illness as well as feeling 'burnt out' from the sheer volume of support provided to local communities throughout the pandemic. During Covid, many staff have found other employment and the sector is experiencing real difficulty in recruiting childcare and support staff.

We have an independent sector that is under-resourced and struggles to deliver under increasing pressures of funding cuts. The Domestic Violence helpline that was managed by Women's Aid was put out to tender and taken by Nexus and is not as connected to the Women's sector and is no longer a specialist women's centred service. There is one women-only service that provides residential support for women with addiction, often having passed through the criminal justice system, that is currently under serious threat of closure.

Victim Support provide free and confidential support for people affected by crime and traumatic events – regardless of whether you have reported the crime to the police. These support services are tailored to the needs of each person, providing information and advice, immediate emotional and practical help, longer term emotional and practical help, Advocacy, Peer support and group work, Restorative justice and Personal safety services. From 2021 they established a pilot scheme, Sexual Offences Legal Advisors (SOLAs) supporting victims of sexual crime engaged the criminal justice system.

Access to education and health is also carried out through the Women's centres, with signposting and free courses on health and wellbeing mainly provided through health trusts. We have a growing number of services that provide support for refugee and asylum

seekers that are operating independently and are not as connected to the established women's movement. Established organisations like the Chinese Welfare Association does not have any dedicated resources for women with the focus on promoting cultural and racial equality. In contrast the Northwest Migrants Forum has a strong team of women focused on Women's Equality and is connected to the Women's sector, providing signposting and support. The Migrant Centre has a strong focus on equality and provides support regionally across NI.

### How well are women's voices represented in the area?

The women's sector is well connected; WSN and other regional networks and organisations sit on several groupings providing connectivity and feeding through to local councils and government departments.

Local Government and councils are working towards community planning, community wealth building and co-design, and have made greater efforts to consult with grassroots groups and to build on the lived experience. The Women's Sector is very active in engaging with the different government departments but there is a tendency for government to consult widely and take the views but not really listen, although there is greater pressure now being put on outcomes, which is welcome. Unfortunately, with little or no feedback the sector is 'consultation weary' with local women giving their views, yet seeing little change when policies are produced.

The Women's Regional 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 there is a continuous two-way flow of information between government and the women's sector and that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and take these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which empowers local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

The Women's Policy Group (WPG) is a platform for women working in policy and advocacy roles in different organisations to share their work and speak with a collective voice on key issues. It is made up of women from trade unions, grassroots women's organisations, women's networks, feminist campaigning organisations, LGBTQI+ organisations, migrant groups, support service providers, NGOs, human rights and equality organisations and individuals. Over the years this important network has ensured there is good communication between politicians, policymakers, and women's organisations on the ground. The WPG is endorsed as a group that advocates on behalf of women of Northern Ireland on a policy level and we use our group expertise to lobby to influence the development and implementation of policies affecting women. This group has collective

expertise on protected characteristics and focus on identifying the intersectional needs of all women. Members of the WPG include WSN, WRDA, NIWEP, RTA, Alliance for Choice, HERe NI, the Migrant Centre, Raise Your Voice, Women's Budget Group to name some of those previously mentioned or detailed below.

Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) promotes and supports rural women in rural Northern Ireland. They are a membership-based organisation whose vision is for an equitable society where rural women are visible, influential, and valued and they work to advance the participation and recognition of rural women. NIRWN would lobby government and is part of the rural community network.

Reclaim the Agenda is a feminist coalition that connects and mobilises women to promote feminist activism through education, campaigning, and celebration. We want a place where all women are safe and secure to reach their potential and have an active role in society and all women can be active change makers & have equal access to power. We are striving for a life free from poverty & discrimination. To have healthcare services that meet our particular needs and a life free from domestic and sexual violence and abuse. To live in a World where women are equally represented as decision makers and have access to good, affordable and flexible provision.

50:50 NI is an organisation working to increase the number of women in politics in Northern Ireland. They provide training for women interested in getting into politics and advocate for change to make politics more compatible with women's lives such as the introduction of maternity leave and better childcare.

The Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (NIWBG) is made up of organisations and individuals from the women's sector, trade union movement, academia and wider civil society in Northern Ireland, with the goal of implementing a gender equal economy. It aims to provide policy and budget-makers with policy analysis to secure substantive equality for women and men through the assessment of gender impact. The NIWBG works with a range of organisations in Northern Ireland on devolved issues and with sister organisations in Wales, Scotland, England and Ireland on East-West and North-South issues.

The Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) was established in 1981 and is an independent non-governmental organisation affiliated to the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH). CAJ seeks to ensure the highest standards in the administration of justice in Northern Ireland by ensuring that the government complies with its responsibilities in international human rights law. CAJ works closely with other domestic and international human rights and equality groups.

### How good is joint working and collaboration?

There is no doubt that we have collaborative working throughout the Women's Centres and Community and Voluntary organisations, we need to extend that collaborative work to

include newly emerging cultural groups and ensure we have integration at all levels. Collaborative working is overall successful among the women's movement but when we reach out to statutory agencies, we see a slight disconnect as they are better resourced but not in tune with grassroots issues. This can lead to fewer referrals being made as they are not always aware of the services available. There is no consistency in the delivery of services or the funding of services, some centres are well supported through Council or Government as it is with our binary politics here, often the political parties will support their own and others struggle to achieve support.

While we have great collaborative platforms, there are some gaps in connecting with Women's Aid and statutory agencies. The Rape Crisis service is newly established and should be included in the Police and local councils to ensure robust signposting and to have the up-to-date information from the grass roots. There are some gaps within the system which is due to resources and more recently staffing is causing major problems for women's centres as they struggle with recruitment and retention of staff.

### **What are the main gaps in support?**

Legal services are a huge gap and while Victim Support offers Sexual Offences Legal Advisors, this is only available if the case is going to court, if it is dropped then this specialist support ends. Access to finance for legal actions is punitive for women who are reluctant to go into debt to proceed with legal actions, in divorce and child custody cases. Legal services for women where English is not their first language would find it extremely hard to access support and there are a very limited number of lawyers who offer pro-bono work.

Accessing up to date information on legal services and the new legislation introduced over the last 3 – 5 years is not uniform across the sector. Advice services are not up to date on the new legislation and indeed even within the legal framework it is not consistent in the signposting and advice. Many women cited getting the right advice was an issue often getting different information and advice from statutory agencies.

Bullying and harassment, takes place on a regular basis often in public and women felt that it was not worth reporting for many reasons, particularly women who have settled here from other countries. Their own immigration status or the court system would not support any action, or they could be reported and potentially have child services investigate them. Services from RapeCrisis NI & Women's Aid have a helpline, but migrant women particularly felt afraid to engage and were not aware of these services. Often this abuse can be from a perpetrator who is perceived to be a respected member of society and indeed high profile cases show the perpetrator publicly supported causing further trauma and preventing reporting.

Poverty and financial hardship increased for women through covid due to low paid, zero-hour contracts and access to welfare benefits had up to 8- or 10-weeks waiting period that

plunged women further into poverty and debt. Money lenders who are linked to paramilitary organisations have a tight grip in some communities which is under-reported, reporting to the police is not an option when the area is dominated by paramilitaries who are often low-level informants or perceived to be the main negotiators in communities. Areas in the grip of paramilitaries are in every city & town and while Government has made some inroads to empower communities it is a fragile state of peace. During Brexit the negative elements in communities were boosted and with anti-protocol activities they are feeling strong. Many women were unaware of how to access legal aid and found misleading information on who was eligible and what the threshold of earnings to qualify.

Appropriate Cultural support is very scarce, our population has changed in ten years, but the statutory agencies have not developed policies and processes to accommodate. Within the organisations that work with new emerging communities the focus has been on access to employment, the EU resettlement scheme and covid response. Roma women reported that they felt inferior seeking assistance because they have larger families and live with extended families, often in very poor housing. Racist abuse is under-reported and those that did report were often not given an incident number meaning it was not officially recorded and no action was taken.

Asylum seekers and refugees do not have any recourse to public funds leaving them with no support and in fear of reporting abuse due to their immigration status. Accessing services is difficult, they are often housed in very deprived areas, experiencing racial abuse and isolation, and living in extremely poor-quality accommodation. During covid they were housed in hotels, (this continues) alongside homeless people with complex needs and they felt unsafe in this accommodation. Access to medical care and support was fragmented across the provision with a huge lack of information and understanding of what is available. Women who are in abusive relationships are further isolated as they are more fearful in asking for help. Newly emerging groups like BomokoNI and Anka Collective provide signposting and cultural appropriate support, however these are small groups with limited capacity.

Women in the Criminal Justice system found it hard to engage with mainstream services as they had multiple areas of need. Securing appropriate housing so they could be with their children was impossible without financial assistance, leaving them in deprived areas without support. Many cited they would not visit their GP for mental health support for fear of this being used against them in accessing their children. Women were often given different advice from various sources, reflecting that up-to-date information on new legislation was not reaching all the service providers and even within legal services. Access to benefits and the length of time for payments to start from 5 - 12 weeks in some cases meant financial independence was limited and women cited they were trapped in poverty and unable to get employment due to their criminal record.

Rural Women face additional barriers in accessing support, transport services are limited and expensive, and there are very few community transport services making it harder to access legal services. Internet signals in some rural areas are very poor and for those on the border with Republic of Ireland they could end up paying higher rate to access internet. Small towns where everyone knows your business and your family made it harder for women to speak out and break free from their abusers. Financially it was much harder for rural women to access services in all areas, from health, education and employment, leading to greater isolation and increased anxiety with little physical support.

### **What barriers prevent women from accessing services?**

A big barrier is accessing up-to-date knowledge on what is available and good signposting. Women interviewed cited they were in a revolving door in accessing services due to poor signposting resulting in a lack of trust in services. The reduction in resources for Women's Centres has reduced the capacity to respond and carry out more outreach work.

Funding for women's training and education in the community is a barrier for women who want to upskill and move into employment or more meaningful employment. No government department in Northern Ireland funds community-based education, yet none of our regional colleges provide any childcare to support women. Funding for delivery of community-based education where a centre can provide childcare and training at times that suit women is piecemeal and a gap developing is that some funds will only provide programme costs, they do not cover a member of staff who is needed to recruit the women, organise the course/tutor, childcare places needed, hospitality and support for the women throughout their course. Centres and groups are being expected to provide this with no reimbursement. Some centres and groups reported that this has resulted in them scaling back what they deliver and therefore not meeting the needs of their local women.

Language is a huge barrier to accessing services, one Women's centre in Belfast has 18 different nationalities using their services and accessing interpreters can be difficult to source and if available are very expensive. This centre is based in an area of high deprivation where the local population see these women as a threat to their services and often make their viewpoint very vocal.

While there is childcare provision in most Women's centres that is affordable and flexible it is oversubscribed, leaving only privatised childcare which is expensive and also oversubscribed. Rural Women face greater challenges in childcare that prevents them taking part in further education and employment. Transport was a barrier for rural women as the bus network has reduced routes and poor timing for fitting in with school runs.

Accessing services through digital means is a major problem for women who do not have the skills or the digital devices. Increasingly everything from personal banking to booking a



GP appointment is digital and this presents problems when there are more complex and multiple needs the system couldn't cope with any variations.

There is a general lack of trust in the Criminal Justice System, asylum seekers and refugees have genuine fears about reporting any crimes due to their own immigration status and women in general under-report crimes because the perpetrator is a perceived to be a respected member of society, the court system would not support any action, or they could be reported and potentially have child services investigate them. Women felt that reporting to the police would only bring more trouble and anxiety and in some areas the stronghold of paramilitary control was a factor in not reporting. The criminal justice system is too slow with cases held for 3 or 4 years and women did not want to go through with that as the sentence would most likely be suspended.

There is little signposting for help in seeking free legal advice with custody cases, divorces and legal documents and court cases. Asylum seekers had very negative experiences with legal firms that mislead documents, didn't file on time, and lost valuable paperwork. Accessing legal advice and getting the right advice is a huge gap and financially prohibitive for many women. The provision relies on the goodwill of solicitor firms who provide advice at reduced rates or work for free and not a service that is available to all. New legislation introduced on domestic violence, hate crime, controlling and coercive behaviour and stalking that has not been widely disseminated leading to confusion for women.

The Gillen Review of the how sexual crimes are managed through the CJS made over 100 recommendations and these are slowly being implemented but there is not enough promotion on these and information is not widely disseminated.

### **What are the capacity building needs in the sector?**

The infrastructure of the women's centres, refugees and women's organisations are in place, but they are seriously under-resourced. The physical infrastructure varies across the sector from modern buildings to buildings that are no longer fit for purpose. The only women-only hostel based in Belfast is under serious threat of closure as they cite the building is not fit for purpose and not deemed financially viable for refurbishment.

Financial resources for the Women's sector are continually under threat with a growing demand for community organisations to be self-sustaining and income generators as the opportunities through tenders and access to public funds through social prescribing is not available. The Women's sector delivers against targets in the Programme for the Government but without adequate budgets. This causes major issues for recruitment and retention of staff especially for childcare, leaving the sector in a continual state of flux.

During covid, our local Government neglected to ringfence budget allocations for Women's Aid refugees as happened in the rest of the UK. This meant the funding was a competitive process open to all community groups which reflects a lack of respect and



understanding of the work that the women's refuges provide and an under-valuing of this work.

We have a high number of disability and welfare claimants which are all a hangover from our conflicted past. Areas of high deprivation would have a higher dependency on prescription medication.

Adapting to our changing population and accommodating women who speak different languages has a huge resource implication. Already a lot of the Women's centres have many different cultures who use the childcare facilities, however it more difficult for many of these women to avail of other services available in the centres such as training and employment courses because of the language barriers. Often it is the children who are doing a lot of translation which is not always appropriate when discussing health issues or benefits.

Our cultural makeup is changing with the statutory agencies slow to respond, it is the women's sector that are supporting the work. The demands on our women's centres are increasing and the demands are culturally changing. Training and education to expand the services and increase our cultural knowledge is essential to providing services for all women.

Legal advice and support for women in navigating the Criminal Justice System is a huge gap and there is a lot of out-of-date information still being shared. Provision and support for women & children who have experienced violence and have left their homes for their own security need proper investment.

The ever-increasing cost of food, clothes and utilities is having an impact on many households across the country and is severely affecting those already experiencing disadvantage. The ever increases costs are also having an impact on the women's centres and groups who support those most in need. Energy bills and other running costs have more than doubled compared to last year yet running cost budgets have not increased and may have been budgeted for up to three years ago. The women's centres have reported an increase in the number of women using the centres during the day because they cannot afford to heat their own homes. Community based organisations providing support and childcare to those most in need also need supported to deliver these frontline services and should be adequately funded to do so or they will have to reduce services.

NI is a country coming out of conflict and carries a scarred past and the transition away from sectarianism has been slow as our political processes struggles to move away from the Green and Orange. It is clear that in the Women's movement there is greater unity and collaborative work taking place across all divides, but it is seriously undervalued and under resourced.

### What impact has Covid-19 had on provision/capacity?

Covid has had major impacts and continues to remain a factor in provision. As services re-open the issues of covid and self-isolating remains in place. Perhaps when the new Government are installed in Stormont the guidance will change from 'Work from Home if you can'.

While covid hampered work there are many advantages that will continue, meeting online has allowed more statutory agencies to be present. Government is currently consulting on a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy which is being carried out on zoom and has better attendance than if it had of been in person.

Returning to face-to-face services has been slow from the Statutory bodies as the Women's Centres and grass root groups have been delivering in person throughout on a reduced capacity this continues. The impact of Covid on mental health has been huge and accessing help is patchy often depending on your postcode whether services are provided. Death by suicide has been consistently rising and these deaths are now exceeding the deaths during our 25 years of conflict and continues to rise. Services to support are not easily accessible with lengthy waiting lists. The health service in NI has huge waiting lists and in particular to women's health, there is still no abortion services here, meaning women are forced to travel to England even more difficult for refuge and asylum seekers.

Online platforms also had a positive effect for some women who found they could use the tech, effectively. For attendance at meetings and formal setting it proved to be more efficient in doing business but less effective in building relationships.



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