





Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

The Impact of  
**Brexit on  
Women**

IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Katharine A. M. Wright,  
Ruth McAreavey and  
Rebecca Donaldson

**Newcastle University**

# Table of Contents

<b>Table of Figures</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Authors</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Acronyms</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>19</b>
1.1 Aims and objectives	19
1.2 Methodology and approach	20
1.3 Background	21
<b>2. Women’s Voices on Brexit</b>	<b>32</b>
2.1 Where are the women speaking on Brexit?	32
2.2 Targeting abuse at women speaking on Brexit	33
2.3 Racism and a rise in hate crime	34
2.4 Summary and recommendations	36
<b>3. Consultations with the Women’s Sector</b>	<b>38</b>
3.1 UK and EU consultations with the women’s sector	38
3.2 Summary and recommendations	40
<b>4. Indirect Impacts and the Political Impasse</b>	<b>42</b>
4.1 Violence against women	42
4.2 Other gender-related strategies	43
4.3 Summary and recommendations	44
<b>5. Information on Brexit</b>	<b>46</b>
5.1 The information vacuum	46
5.2 Lack of information	47
5.3 Misunderstanding Section 75	49
5.4 Erosion of women’s trust	50
5.5 Summary and recommendations	53

<b>6. Protection for Women’s Rights Post-Brexit</b>	<b>56</b>
6.1 Brexit, the Protocol and the Windsor Framework: political distrust	56
6.2 Protections of rights post-Brexit	58
6.3 Spotlight on: Access to reproductive health services (maternity and abortion)	62
6.4 Summary and recommendations	65
<b>7. The Social and Economic Impact of Brexit on Women</b>	<b>68</b>
7.1 Communities, families and social support	69
7.2 Employment	71
7.3 The rural economy	73
7.4 Border communities	75
7.5 Data and reporting on women’s status	77
7.6 Summary and recommendations	78
<b>8. The Post-Brexit Funding Landscape for Women</b>	<b>80</b>
8.1 The loss of European funding	80
8.2 Post-EU funds: the UK Shared Prosperity Fund	82
8.3 Emerging issues with SPF	84
8.4 Summary and recommendations	86
<b>9. Conclusion</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Methodological Approach</b>	<b>90</b>
Steering group	90
Desk research	90
Expert seminar	90
Focus groups	91
Interviews	91
Data analysis	92
Visual artist	92
<b>Appendix 2: Visual Minutes Focus Group A</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Appendix 3: Visual Minutes Focus Group B</b>	<b>94</b>

## Table of Figures

---

<b>Figure 1:</b> Brexit is a good thing for the UK	<b>22</b>
<b>Figure 2:</b> Perceptions of the Protocol as a good thing for Northern Ireland	<b>23</b>
<b>Figure 3:</b> Trust/Distrust in the UK Government with respect to the Protocol	<b>51</b>
<b>Figure 4:</b> Trust/Distrust in the NI Executive with respect to the Protocol	<b>52</b>
<b>Figure 5:</b> Trust/Distrust in the Irish Government with respect to the Protocol	<b>52</b>
<b>Figure 6:</b> Trust/Distrust in the European Commission/European Union with respect to the Protocol 4	<b>53</b>
<b>Figure 7:</b> Employment by sex, aged 16-64 in NI	<b>72</b>

---

# Acknowledgements

---

We thank the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland for their feedback and support throughout the research process.

In particular, we thank the women who participated in our focus groups. In addition to the individuals we interviewed and those who participated in our expert seminar.

This report would not have been possible without the support of its steering group: Elaine Croy, Women's Resource and Development Agency; Louise Coyle, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network; and Jonna Monaghan, Women's Platform, including through providing feedback on earlier drafts. In addition, Elaine and Louise supported the organisation of the focus groups.

We acknowledge and are grateful to the ESRC-funded Post-Brexit Governance in Northern Ireland project for providing gender disaggregated opinion polling data, in particular Lisa Whitten. We thank Colin Murray for his helpful guidance on legal aspects pertaining to Brexit. The report has also benefited from discussions with Annick Masselot, Dagmar Schiek, Roberta Guerrina, Toni Haastrup, Annika Bergman Rosamond and Samantha Turner. All errors and omissions remain the authors' own.

Finally, thank you to the research support team in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology and the contracts team at Newcastle University for their assistance in administering the grant.

## Authors

---

### Dr Katharine A. M. Wright

Katharine A. M. Wright is Senior Lecturer in International Politics at Newcastle University. Her research concerns the implementation of the UN Women, Peace and Security agenda at a local, national and international level. She has extensive experience of engaging with policy making and civil society communities globally to inform evidence based decision making.

### Professor Ruth McAreavey

Ruth McAreavey is Professor of Sociology at Newcastle University. She is interested in rural social change; international migration to rural and regional places; rural policy and development; research ethics and social inequalities. She has published widely on these issues and her research has informed government policy. She is an active member of the European Society for Rural Sociology, is currently co-editor-in-chief of *Sociologia Ruralis* and is a Trustee of the Plunkett Foundation.

### Rebecca Donaldson

Rebecca Donaldson is a PhD Researcher in Sociology at Newcastle University. Her thesis centres feminist understandings of food justice and food sovereignty movements in the UK, and she has a background working in the women's sector in Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

*This report was commissioned by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) further to its role, with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), as the Dedicated Mechanism under Article 2(1) of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol. It was written by Katharine A. M. Wright, Ruth McAreavey and Rebecca Donaldson. The views in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of ECNI. Responsibility for any statements, errors or omissions in this report rests with the authors. This report was finalised in August 2023.*



# Acronyms

---

<b>CAJ</b>	Committee for the Administration of Justice
<b>CEDAW</b>	UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>CRF</b>	Community Renewal Fund
<b>CTA</b>	Common Travel Area
<b>DLUHC</b>	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
<b>ECHR</b>	European Convention on Human Rights
<b>ECNI</b>	Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
<b>EIGE</b>	European Institute for Gender Equality
<b>ERDF</b>	European Regional Development Fund
<b>ESRC</b>	Economic and Social Research Council
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EUSS</b>	European Union Settled Status
<b>GAA</b>	Gaelic Athletic Association
<b>GB</b>	Great Britain
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>GFA</b>	Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement
<b>LGBTQI+</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex +
<b>MLA</b>	Member of the Legislative Assembly
<b>MP</b>	Member of Parliament
<b>NAP</b>	National Action Plan

<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>NHS</b>	National Health Service
<b>NI</b>	Northern Ireland
<b>NIHRC</b>	Northern Ireland Human Right's Commission
<b>NIWC</b>	Northern Ireland Women's Coalition
<b>PSNI</b>	Police Service for Northern Ireland
<b>ROI</b>	Republic of Ireland
<b>SEUPB</b>	Special EU Programmes Body
<b>SPF</b>	Shared Prosperity Fund
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UKIM</b>	UK Internal Market
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNSCR 1325</b>	UN Security Council Resolution on Women Peace and Security
<b>VAWG</b>	Violence Against Women and Girls
<b>WPS</b>	Women, Peace and Security

# Executive Summary

---

This report is based on research that was commissioned by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI), which began in November 2022 and concluded in August 2023.

The aim of the report is to provide a high level, preliminary analysis of the actual, perceived and potential socioeconomic impacts of the UK's withdrawal from the EU on women and girls in Northern Ireland.

To support this, the report identifies, by way of a high level, preliminary analysis, the key socioeconomic impacts (actual, perceived and potential) of Brexit on women in Northern Ireland. It does so through engaging with civil society organisations that represent women, other relevant equality and human rights stakeholders and with women directly to aid the identification of key concerns and impacts and inform and subsequently refine the above analysis and subsequent recommendations.

The report makes recommendations for the UK Government, the NI Executive and others, on how any identified negative impacts could be addressed and/or mitigated to promote positive outcomes. The report is presented thematically, with findings from the qualitative research incorporated throughout.

The research draws on a variety of different data sources in order to triangulate our findings, including: desk-based research; an expert seminar with third-sector organisations working on a range of issues related to Brexit; interviews with individuals representing organisations reflective of the cross-cutting and intersectional identities of women in NI, with a fair geographical spread reflective of rural and urban lived experiences; and focus groups with women from across NI.

The timing of the research intersected with other crises including the ongoing cost of living crisis, war in Ukraine, violence against women, and political stalemate in Northern Ireland. The latter is directly linked to Brexit with an impasse over the Protocol. Commonly discussed in the research too were the longer-term impacts of austerity, universal credit, NHS crises, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Brexit is thus just one of a number of crises impacting Northern Ireland, but it also intertwines with a number of these challenges making it difficult to distinguish what is due to Brexit and what is not.

## Women's Voices on Brexit

Women have been marginalised from media coverage of Brexit since the run up to the referendum in 2016. When women have been included, often they are asked to speak on perceived 'women's issues', rather than the core issues which have defined the focus of the Brexit debate, namely trade, defence and immigration. These patterns have been replicated in academia whereby gender expertise on Brexit has been siloed, further contributing to the side-lining of both women's experience and expertise on the impact of Brexit on women.

The abuse of women in public life in Northern Ireland oftentimes occurs at a level which falls outside the scope of the law, but nevertheless is felt strongly by women. It also intersects with racism and is felt particularly by minority ethnic women. This has impacted the ability of women to engage publicly with debates and discussions on Brexit, including within academia. The perception that Brexit has exacerbated racism has further heightened this challenge.

Significantly, evidence suggests a perception that the rise in race hate crime can be attributed to Brexit as a trigger event and that Brexit has had a particular impact on the lived experiences of minority ethnic women in Northern Ireland. The normalisation of xenophobia and racism is also perceived by women we spoke to, to be linked to an increase in paramilitary activity, which has particular impacts on young women.

## Recommendations

- a) **Commission research into the impact of Brexit on specific groups.** ECNI and relevant NI Departments, including the Department for Communities, the Executive Office, and the Department for Justice, should commission more specific research into the impact of Brexit on particular groups of women in Northern Ireland, including women who are non-EU nationals; women subjected to domestic violence; women who have no recourse to public funds; women who are asylum seekers/refugees; and minority ethnic and migrant women who are subjected to race hate crime. This is to address the need for specialist advice pertaining to these groups to inform future policy. Following this research, action should be taken to address the matters identified therein.

## Consultations with the Women's Sector

There has been a lack of women, or critical actors working for gender equality, involved in the Brexit negotiations. This is reflected in consultations, where both the EU and UK have prioritised meetings with corporate lobbyists over the third sector, including the women's sector. The lack of transparency on who is invited to these meetings and their agendas is a further challenge to understanding if, and how, issues impacting women might be discussed.

When the women's sector is consulted there are further barriers to their meaningful engagement. First, a perception that they are not meaningfully listened to and second, a lack of resources for their organisations to properly consult their members on their views on Brexit.

### Recommendations

- b) **Fund the women's sector.** Even in a context of reduced public expenditure, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Northern Ireland Office as co-signatories of the Fifth National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security should consider mechanisms to effectively support the women's sector in NI, including the provision of direct core funding to women's groups. This would help support their role in future consultations, including in relation to the implementation of the Protocol amended by the Windsor Framework, but also on an ongoing basis to monitor the impact of Brexit, including on women.
- c) **Regularly and meaningfully consult the women's sector.** The UK Government, UK Departments, NI Executive and NI Departments, should ensure regular, meaningful, and structured engagement with the Northern Ireland women's sector, from the outset in future consultations, including in relation to the implementation of the Protocol and subsequent amendments made through the Windsor Framework but also on an ongoing basis to monitor the impact of Brexit, including on women. They should ensure that the needs of women are taken into account in the development and delivery of post Brexit legislation, policies, and services. There should also be regular, meaningful, and structured engagement with the Northern Ireland women's sector by the EU on the impact of Brexit, including on women.

## Indirect Impacts and the Political Impasse

The political impasse over the Protocol/Windsor Framework which has led to the NI Assembly not sitting has resulted in legislative deadlock and contributed to budgetary issues as referred to in Chapter 8. Brexit has therefore had an indirect impact on addressing violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland, which is the only nation without a strategy in place to address the issue.

It has also had an indirect impact on the finalisation of other key gender related strategies, including the Gender Equality Strategy and Childcare Strategy, that have the potential, if effectively implemented and adequately resourced, to address key inequalities experienced by women in Northern Ireland, including for example, in the areas of childcare, employment, participation in political and public life, health and social care, and education.

### Recommendations

- d) Prioritise a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy for NI.** The NI Executive and the Executive Office should prioritise the adoption and effective resourcing of the Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland Strategy, which addresses the impact of Brexit on women and girls, and if necessary, the UK Government should consider introducing the Strategy in the absence of the Executive.
- e) Progress other key gender related strategies for NI.** The NI Executive, and relevant NI Departments, including the Department for Communities and the Department for Education should, as a matter of urgency, finalise and implement other key gender related strategies, including an updated/ revised Gender Equality Strategy which should address the impact of Brexit on women and girls.

## Information on Brexit

The legal framework for exploring ‘the actual, perceived and potential socioeconomic impacts of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU on women in Northern Ireland’ lies within Protocol (Windsor Framework) Article 2, which sets out the UK Government’s commitments on equality and human rights post Brexit. In so doing, it sustains the importance of equality and human rights commitments as set out in the GFA. Article 2 states that there will be no diminution of rights, safeguards or equality of opportunity as set out in Chapter Six of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement as a result of Brexit. In addition, Annex 1 of the Protocol (Windsor Framework) sets out six areas of EU law where ‘dynamic alignment’ is to be maintained, meaning that law in Northern Ireland must reflect changes to the six listed equality Directives.

Brexit has been a process closely associated with misinformation, perceived by some women to come from a range of sources, including government officials.

Evidence from women we spoke to has indicated that the lack of official information on how Brexit impacts day-to-day life in Northern Ireland has made it difficult for many of these women to navigate issues affecting their lives. This has been made all the more challenging by some officials misapplying the law, potentially due to a lack of understanding of the legal implications of Brexit for different cohorts of people, which has been reported in previous research, as well as by participants in this research.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, certain groups of women, including migrant women, are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by gatekeepers within some migrant and minority ethnic communities.

The complex and highly technical nature of Brexit has added to the information vacuum, including the ability of the third sector/women's sector to keep up with and understand, the impact of Brexit on women.

Misunderstandings of Section 75 of the NI Act 1998 by government officials (including in NI) has resulted in concerns being raised that issues that impact women disproportionately compared to men (or vice versa), including Brexit, are not being addressed by gender specific solutions, and this has resulted in a lack of trust in government officials upholding their equality duties.

The gendered impact of the information vacuum may have contributed to a lack of trust in relation to the implementation of the Protocol by women as compared to men, directed at key drivers of Brexit, namely the UK Government.

## Recommendations

- f) **Provide accessible information on the impact of Brexit on everyday life in Northern Ireland.** The UK Government and NI Executive should more effectively communicate with citizens in Northern Ireland about the impact of Brexit and the Protocol/Windsor Framework on their day-to-day lives, including on what is changing; what is remaining the same; and how they may find out more information, particularly in relation to their rights and entitlements, including cross border issues. This should include specific information relating to women, including minority ethnic women, rural women, disabled women, and other women with multiple identities.

1 Pivotal (2023) [Impact of Brexit on Minority Ethnic and Migrant People in Northern Ireland](#). ECNI

## Recommendations

- g) Create an information portal on Brexit.** Linked to the above recommendation, The NI Executive and relevant NI Departments should create an online information portal that sets out key Brexit related information. It should include a FAQ section and be regularly updated. It should be accessible in different languages to support minority ethnic and migrant women, and accessible in different formats for disabled women. Information included in this portal should set out specific information relating to the rights and entitlements of women post Brexit. Steps should be taken to raise awareness of this online portal with women in NI, including rural women, minoritized ethnic women and other women with multiple identities. This should include engaging the women's sector.
- h) Ensure UK and NI Government officials have up-to date information on Article 2.** The UK Government, NI Executive and relevant Departments should provide guidance for relevant staff on Article 2, in addition to regular and effective training. They should also act to ensure UK and NI Executive policy guidance includes reference to Article 2.
- i) Ensure base-line knowledge of Section 75 amongst relevant Government officials.** UK and NI Departments, and other public bodies, who are subject to the Section 75 duties, should take additional steps to ensure the effective implementation of these duties, including in the context of the development/implementation of Brexit related policies, for example, through the effective training of officials on their obligations under Section 75.

## Protection of Women's Rights Post-Brexit

The distinctiveness of the Northern Ireland post-conflict and geographical context is evident in our findings. A complicated legal infrastructure has been implemented to uphold the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, ensuring that certain equality and human rights of citizens would continue to be protected. Particularly prevalent is the fear about the potential erosion of women's rights (relating especially to gender equality in the workplace and healthcare, including reproductive rights).

The NI Assembly, as a matter of best practice, can choose to voluntarily align with EU developments, even if not required to do so under Article 2 of the Protocol. These include rights relating to gender pay transparency measures, work life balance and gender balance on non-executive director roles. Further, there is a proposed EU Directive on combatting violence against women and domestic violence. Voluntarily aligning with these EU developments will help to significantly strengthen rights for women in Northern Ireland.



The complex and convoluted context for upholding rights for women in Northern Ireland has created confusion, frustration, and an evident sense by women of being side-lined by politicians. The way in which Brexit and debates surrounding the Protocol/Windsor Framework have dominated the political landscape has detracted from progressing important policies that affect women's everyday lives.

The disproportionate impact on women of the changing health policy context as a result of Brexit has meant that women with different types of immigration status, who are eligible for healthcare, do not have guaranteed access to that care.

The political discourse and divisions that were manifest around Brexit, including the political stagnation in Northern Ireland, has resulted in a lack of trust by women in politicians, along with a sense that progression of important gender policy areas have been neglected.

## Recommendations

- j) Ensure clarity and signposting on rights.** The UK Government, NI Executive and relevant NI Departments should provide greater clarity on women's rights post Brexit and ensure signposting to equality and human rights organisations, including the Dedicated Mechanism, in its communications on Brexit.
- k) Ensure no reduction of women's rights and compliance with Article 2 is included in policy and processes from the outset.** The UK Government and NI Executive should ensure there is no reduction in women's rights in Northern Ireland as a result of Brexit, including ensuring compliance with Article 2 obligations. It should also ensure consideration of the extent to which any change to legislation or policy engages Article 2 from the outset.
- l) Ensure Explanatory Memoranda / Human Rights Memoranda detail consideration of Article 2 conformity.** Aligned to the recommendation above, the UK Government and NI Executive should ensure that where Explanatory Memoranda / Human Rights Memoranda of draft legislation are likely to engage Article 2, that they detail what consideration has been given to ensure conformity.
- m) Deliver on the New Decade New Approach commitment.** The NI Executive and UK Government should deliver on the New Decade New Approach commitment to progress the NI Bill of Rights through a dedicated NI Bill of Rights Committee, that strengthens rights for women in Northern Ireland and which employs a gender sensitive approach mindful of 1325/Women, Peace and Security.

## Recommendations

- n) **Commission research into non-diminution relating to Article 2.** ECNI and/or NIHRC should consider commissioning additional research into non-diminution related to Article 2/impact of Brexit, including in areas, such as access by women to health services (including but not limited to the experiences of migrant women, and maternity services) and immigration status/citizenship.
- o) **Ensure all eligible women can access healthcare.** The UK Government, the NI Executive, NI Departments, including the Department for Health, and NI Health Trusts, should take effective steps to address barriers to women, including minority ethnic women and/or women seeking asylum, to accessing public services, particularly health care services, post Brexit. For example, but not limited to, providing information and training to frontline health workers.
- p) **Align with future EU legislation on women's rights.** The UK Government, NI Executive and NI Departments should voluntarily align with future EU legislation which strengthens women's rights, including equality and human rights impacting women, even if not required under Article 2, to mitigate the impact of Brexit on women. For example, but not limited to, binding pay transparency measures, minimum rights for victims of violence against women and, gender balance on corporate boards.

## The Social and Economic Impact of Brexit on Women

The ruptures to communities and families have a particular impact on women given they play an important role in supporting the family unit. Wider economic circumstances may have a ripple effect on women.

Many women are very fearful in relation to the future and many aspects of Brexit including the potential impact on the border; peace; employment opportunities; and general community cohesion.

The intersection of a myriad of issues including Brexit, political stagnation, cost-of-living crisis and the legacy of austerity impacts on women's everyday lives.

Migrant women subjected to domestic abuse may be unaware of their rights and may be vulnerable where they rely on partners to help them secure their legal immigration status.

The weak economy and declining employment opportunities for border communities was considered by many women to diminish prospects for them and their families.

The loss of the ability, post Brexit, to benchmark the status of women in Northern Ireland against other EU member states removes an important advocacy tool for understanding gender equality in comparative context.

## Recommendations

- q) **Explore the impact of Brexit on employment for women in border and rural communities.** The Department for the Economy should examine the impact of Brexit on employment opportunities for women, particular for those living in border and rural communities, given perceptions amongst women that challenging economic opportunities diminish prospects for them and their families.
- r) **Review the impact of post Brexit cross border travel requirements.** The Home Office should review post Brexit changes, and proposed changes, to cross border travel requirements to assess the impact on women in Northern Ireland, particularly minority ethnic and migrant women living in border and rural communities, and to take measures to address/mitigate barriers identified.
- s) **Continue to collect comparable data on women's status.** The UK Government, and relevant NI Departments should continue to collect and publish comparable data in line with the European Gender Equality Index and should come to an agreement with the EU to continue to submit data to the European Gender Equality Index to enable continued benchmarking against comparator nations. In the absence of an agreement, the UK Government and relevant NI Departments should commit to collecting and publishing this data on a regular basis. This data should include disaggregated data on women in Northern Ireland so that it is comparable at EU level.
- t) **Address gaps in the collection/publication of data on women.** NI Departments should also take steps to address any gaps in collection and/or publication of data, post Brexit, relating to women in Northern Ireland so as to ensure the effective policy and service delivery and to fulfil obligations under Section 75 of the NI Act 1998.

## Recommendations

- u) **Address gaps in information/support for migrant women experiencing domestic violence.** The Home Office, and the Executive Office should take steps to increase awareness amongst migrant women in NI experiencing domestic abuse of their rights relating to securing immigration status, and to increase guidance and support for them on securing their immigration status post Brexit.

## The Post-Brexit Funding Landscape for Women

The full impact of the transition to Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) on the women's sector is not yet fully understood in terms of loss of services; staff and overall capacity, but early indications are that some women's organisations have not, to date, received sufficient replacement funding under the SPF.

European funds supported initiatives specifically designed to give women a voice. It is unclear if SPF will continue to support this activity.

## Recommendations

- v) **Ensure Shared Prosperity Funds support services provided to Section 75 equality groups including women.** The Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) should ensure the processes for administering Shared Prosperity Funds continues to support services provided to Section 75 equality groups, including women in NI. In so doing it should review and evaluate the roll out and implementation of the SPF on services to support women in NI and address gaps in funding for essential services that support women.
- w) **Ensure effective funding for women's sector.** The NI Executive, and relevant NI Departments should ensure the long term, effective, resourcing of the NI women's sector, including addressing any gaps in essential services for women, impacted as a result of the loss of EU funding and/or budget cuts.



Artwork by Kerrie Hanna

## 1. Introduction

---

### 1.1 Aims and objectives

This report is based on research that was commissioned by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI), which began in November 2022 and concluded in August 2023. The aim of the report is to provide a high level, preliminary analysis of the actual, perceived and potential socioeconomic impacts of the UK's withdrawal from the EU on women and girls in Northern Ireland.

To support this, the report identifies, by way of a high level, preliminary analysis, the key socioeconomic impacts (actual, perceived and potential) of Brexit on women in Northern Ireland. It does so through engaging with civil society organisations that represent women, other relevant equality and human rights stakeholders and with women directly to aid the identification of key concerns and impacts and inform and subsequently refine the above analysis and subsequent recommendations.

The report makes recommendations for the UK Government, the NI Executive and others, on how any identified negative impacts could be addressed and/or mitigated to promote positive outcomes. These are summarised at the end of each chapter, in addition to a number of cross-cutting recommendations included in the conclusion.

The report is presented thematically, with findings from the qualitative research incorporated throughout the chapters, including the identification of key quotes from research participants. The report thus explores such impacts in terms of challenges to hearing women's voices on Brexit (Chapter 2); indirect impacts resulting from the political impasse over the Ireland/NI Protocol (now known as the Windsor Framework), including on addressing violence against women and girls (Chapter 3); consultations with the women's sector (Chapter 4); the lack of availability of information on the impact of Brexit on women's day-to-day lives in Northern Ireland and the subsequent erosion of women's trust (Chapter 5); the protection of women's rights post-Brexit (Chapter 6); the socio-economic impact of Brexit on women across Northern Ireland (Chapter 7); and the post-Brexit funding landscape for women in Northern Ireland (Chapter 8). A short conclusion summarises the key research findings.

## 1.2 Methodology and approach

A small steering group drawn from wide representation across the women's sector was established to act in an advisory capacity to the project team.

The report takes an intersectional approach, to consider the impacts on women who experience disadvantage or discrimination due to intersectional or multiple identities, including the specific impacts for people living/working in rural areas; minority ethnic women; and disabled women. Intersectionality is an approach introduced into the academic space by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s<sup>2</sup>, but earlier articulated by the Combahee River Collective (although they did not coin the term itself) through a similar concept of 'interlocking oppressions'<sup>3</sup>. This means that it is not possible to say 'there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQI+ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things'.<sup>4</sup>

The research draws on a variety of different data sources in order to triangulate our findings. First, desk-based research through a review of existing academic and grey<sup>5</sup> literature. Second, an expert seminar with eight third-sector organisations working on a range of issues related to Brexit. Third, we conducted interviews with individuals representing eleven organisations reflective of the cross-cutting and intersectional identities of women in NI, with a fair geographical spread reflective of rural and urban lived experiences. Fourth, six focus groups with 32 women were undertaken with groups broadly reflective of the myriad lived experiences of women across NI. Finally, we commissioned an artist, Kerrie Hanna, to draw visual minutes of two of the focus groups to aid our analysis (See Appendices 2 and 3).

Due to the political sensitivity surrounding Brexit, and also related challenges for women speaking publicly about issues deemed 'political', we have chosen not to identify the individuals (or where applicable their organisations) who took part in the expert seminar or were interviewed to protect their anonymity. As a result, all the quotes used are anonymised. We applied the same principle of anonymity to the focus groups.

A full account of the methodology and approach is available in Appendix 1.

---

2 Columbia Law School, (2017), [Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later](#), Columbia Law School

3 Taylor, K-Y, (2019), [Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective](#), Monthly Review

4 Columbia Law School, (2017), [Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later](#), Columbia Law School

5 Grey literature refers to information on all levels of government, academia, business and industry in electronic and print formats not controlled by commercial or academic publishing.

## 1.3 Background

To contextualise the report, and its findings, this section provides an overview of some of the background factors which both contribute to the need to focus specifically on women and girls in Northern Ireland and provide further explanatory detail for elements within the research findings.

### The gendered impact of Brexit

Previous research has demonstrated that since the announcement of a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU by then Prime Minister David Cameron in February 2016 'Brexit' has been a gendered process notable for the marginalisation of women and 'women's issues' across the referendum campaigns, media coverage, academia and in the resulting negotiations from both a UK and EU perspective. As Achilleos-Sarll and Martill<sup>6</sup> note, the language used in the Brexit campaigns was masculinised, drawn from business, e.g. 'deal-making', and used military metaphors, e.g. equating Brexit to the Battle of Trafalgar. This framing contributes to understanding how 'men's concerns' – and masculinised politics – regarding security, the market, strength, and the protection of their families' became prioritised.<sup>7</sup> The nature of the Leave and Remain campaigns were also highly adversarial in nature<sup>8</sup>, with concerns raised about a clear xenophobic and anti-immigration line emerging from the 'leave' campaigns<sup>9</sup> which contributed to disengaging women from Brexit.<sup>10</sup> As Hozic and True<sup>11</sup> highlight the result has been a 'paradox of men's dominance of the Brexit campaign [and resulting negotiations] and women's rise in the political crisis that ensued after the referendum vote.' A specific focus on women and girls in Northern Ireland is thus important, to understand if and how women have been impacted by Brexit.

6 Achilleos-Sarll, C., Martill, B., (2019), [Toxic Masculinity: Militarism, Deal-Making and the Performance of Brexit](#), Palgrave-Macmillan.

7 *ibid.*

8 Usherwood, S., Wright, K.A.M., (2017) [Sticks and Stones: Comparing Twitter Campaigning Strategies in the European Union Referendum](#), *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*

9 Golec De Zavala, A., Guerra, R. and Simão, C. (2017) 'The Relationship between the Brexit Vote and Individual Predictors of Prejudice: Collective Narcissism, Right Wing Authoritarianism, Social Dominance Orientation', *Frontiers in Psychology*.

10 Guerrina, R., Exadaktylos, T., Guerra, S., (2018) [Gender, Ownership and Engagement during the European Union Referendum: Gendered Frames and the Reproduction of Binaries](#), *European Journal of Politics and Gender*

11 Hozic, A.A., True, J., (2017) [Brexit as a Scandal: Gender and Global Trumpism](#), *Review of International Political Economy*



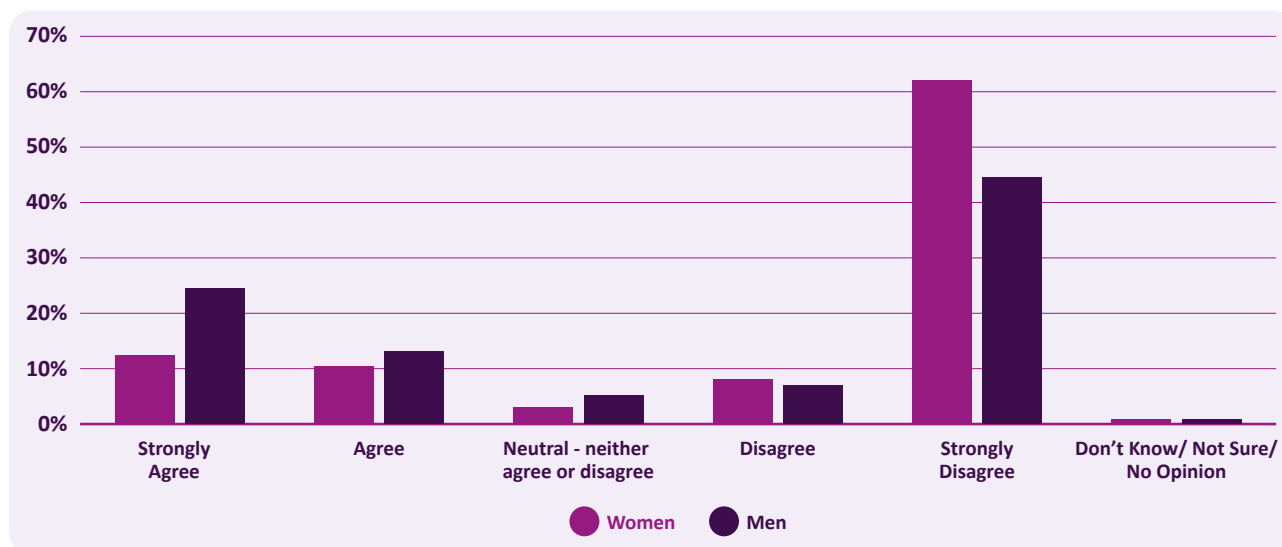
## Brexit vote and women's engagement

Given the highly charged and gendered context in which the Brexit referendum took place it is unsurprising to find women across the UK reported a knowledge deficit indicating lower quality engagement and their lack of engagement by the Leave and Remain campaigns.<sup>12</sup> While there was no overall gender gap in voting in Northern Ireland in the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, women are not a homogenous group. It is worth noting that younger women were more likely to be pro-Remain and in the border region only 28% of Leave voters were women.<sup>13</sup> In addition, more recently a gender gap has emerged in Northern Ireland with 61% of women supporting Remain compared to 55% of men.<sup>14</sup>

## Gendered perceptions of Brexit

Polling in Northern Ireland from October 2022<sup>15</sup> shows a clear gender gap has emerged in perceptions on Brexit. For example, 39% of men compared to 24% of women polled agreed or strongly agreed that Brexit was a good thing for the UK, with 71% of women and only 53% of men disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Brexit is a good thing for the UK**



Source: ESRC-funded 'a place between': the Multilevel Dynamics of Implementing the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

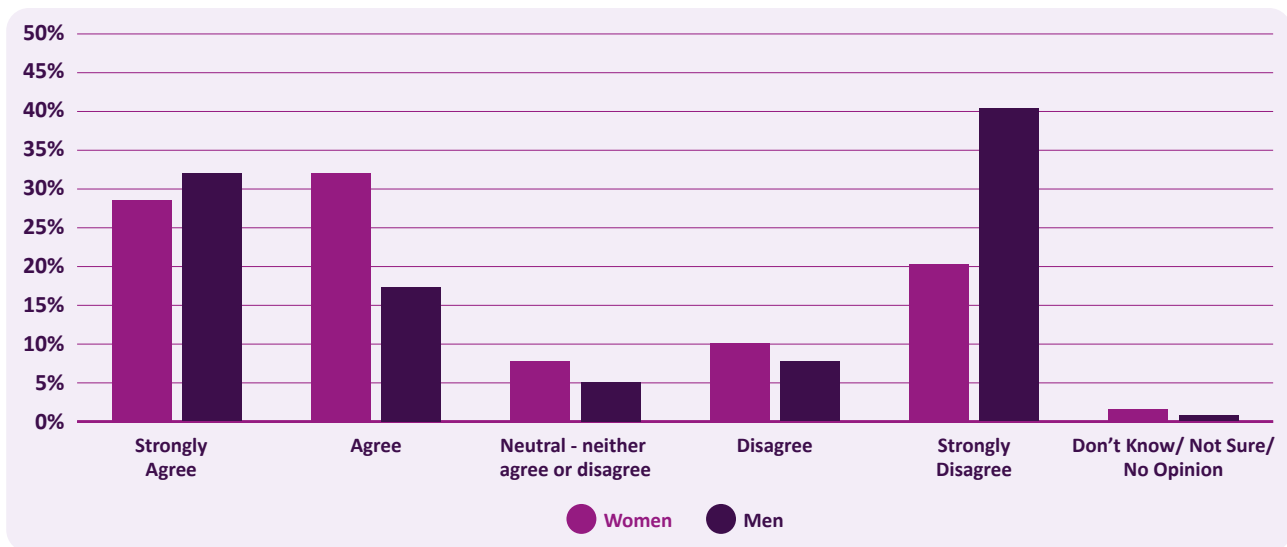
- 12 Guerrina, R., Exadaktylos, T., Guerra, S., (2018) [Gender, Ownership and Engagement during the European Union Referendum: Gendered Frames and the Reproduction of Binaries](#), Bristol University Press
- 13 Galligan, Y., (2019) [Brexit, Gender and Northern Ireland](#), in *Gender and Queer Perspectives on Brexit*, ed. Dustin, M., Ferreira, N., Millns, S, Palgrave Macmillan
- 14 Galligan, Y., (2019) [Brexit, Gender and Northern Ireland](#), in *Gender and Queer Perspectives on Brexit*, ed. Dustin, M., Ferreira, N., Millns, S, Palgrave Macmillan
- 15 Queen's University Belfast, (2022) [Governance for 'a Place between': The Multilevel Dynamics of Implementing the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland](#), Queens University Belfast

# The Impact of Brexit on Women

IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The same polling also showed a significant gender split in opinion on the Protocol, 61% of women compared to 49% of men polled in Northern Ireland agreed or strongly agreed it was a good thing for Northern Ireland, while 30% of women and 47% of men disagreed or strongly disagreed (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2 Perceptions of the Protocol as a good thing for Northern Ireland**



Source: ESRC-funded 'a place between': the Multilevel Dynamics of Implementing the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

## Intersecting crises

The timing of the research intersected with other crises including the ongoing cost of living crisis, war in Ukraine, violence against women, and political stalemate in Northern Ireland. The latter is directly linked to Brexit with an impasse over the Protocol. Commonly discussed in the research too were the longer-term impacts of austerity, universal credit, NHS crises, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Brexit is thus just one of a number of crises impacting Northern Ireland, but it also intertwines with a number of these challenges making it difficult to distinguish what is due to Brexit and what is not.

## Violence against women in Northern Ireland

Women's Aid (UK) has highlighted that the Brexit referendum was accompanied by an uptick in reports of harassment and violence against women.<sup>16</sup> Even accounting for the underreporting of such crime<sup>17</sup> or that sometimes the nature of threats and harassment that women experience fall short of criminal law<sup>18</sup>,

16 Women's Aid, (Accessed June 2023), [The Impact of Leaving the European Union](#)

17 Women's Aid, (Accessed June 2023) [How common is domestic abuse?](#)

18 Turner, C., Swaine, A., (forthcoming) [Law, language and the power of 'Invisible Threats' of Violence against women](#), Journal of Law and Society

Police Service NI records show a general increase in levels of domestic abuse incidents and crimes, with incident levels in 2021/22 one and a half times higher than those at the start of the series (2004/5) and crime levels two and a quarter times higher.<sup>19</sup> Women and girls in Northern Ireland are disproportionately affected by violence, abuse and intimidation. According to the Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI), between 2017 and 2021, 34 women and girls were killed by men.<sup>20</sup> Further, between April 2021 to March 2022, women and girls made up 78% of all victims of sexual crimes, 68% of domestic abuse, 64% of harassment and as of April 2022, 95% of stalking crimes in Northern Ireland. Rates of femicide in Northern Ireland are some of the highest in Europe, and notably three times the rest of the UK<sup>21</sup>, with domestic abuse described as a ‘motivation’ for the vast majority of cases.<sup>22</sup>

## The Good Friday Agreement

The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (GFA) was signed in April 1998 and was intended to end the historical legacy of violent conflict (often referred to as ‘the Troubles’) that had prevailed between two dominant ethno-political communities in Northern Ireland for close to three decades. It restored self-government to Northern Ireland through ‘power sharing’, though the NI Assembly is currently not sitting due to a political impasse related to Brexit and the Protocol. A new statutory Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) was established, along with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), superseding various other Commissions and with a role to ‘advise on, validate and monitor the statutory obligation’<sup>23</sup> that the GFA brought.

The GFA conferred rights to citizens that went beyond the nation state and were intertwined with European citizenship.<sup>24</sup> It recognises the indivisibility of human rights in that one type of right - civil, political, economic, social, or cultural - is not more important than another. Those rights are about creating opportunities for full participation in society and relate largely to the two predominant identities within the population and to broader human rights, including equality and non-discrimination.<sup>25</sup>

---

19 Police Service of Northern Ireland, (Accessed June 2023), [Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland: Update to 30th June 2022](#)

20 Police Service Northern Ireland, (2022) [Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls, Action Plan](#)

21 Ferguson, A., (2022) [Why are Northern Ireland's women being silenced over Brexit?](#), OpenDemocracy

22 Police Service Northern Ireland, (Accessed June 2023) [Police Recorded Crime Statistics](#)

23 Good Friday Agreement, (1998), p. 21 para 6.

24 Shafir, G., Brysk, A., (2006), [The Globalization of Rights: From Citizenship to Human Rights](#), Citizenship Studies

25 McCrudden, C. (2017) [The Good Friday Agreement, Brexit, and Rights](#). (A Royal Irish Academy – British Academy Brexit Briefing). Royal Irish Academy/British Academy.

The inclusion of gender issues was considered to be an achievement arising from the direct involvement of women negotiators<sup>26</sup>, but following the agreement, concerns were raised that gender issues were deprioritised in the decision-making process.<sup>27</sup> This being the case, it reflects the injustice that follows when women’s voices are rendered invisible.<sup>28</sup>

Substantive rights protections are grounded in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)<sup>29</sup>, but many active safeguards against discrimination on the basis of protected characteristics derive from EU law.<sup>30</sup> The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) is an international court that upholds the rights set out in the ECHR. The ECHR is a ‘living instrument’, developing and evolving constantly<sup>31</sup>, and engages Article 2 of the Protocol.<sup>32</sup> Thus ECHR is enshrined in the GFA and it underpins human rights in Northern Ireland. Concerns have been raised that if the UK leaves the ECHR this will be a breach of the GFA.<sup>33</sup>

The GFA has three dimensions relating to government relationships, one internal to Northern Ireland, a second relating to North-South relations and an East-West dimension.<sup>34</sup> Details include agreed mechanisms for addressing contested areas including on constitutional issues; cross-border relations; and equality of opportunity and human rights.<sup>35</sup> On the rights of women, it recognises their right to ‘full and equal political participation’, and this explicit inclusion is due to the efforts of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (NIWC).<sup>36</sup>

- 
- 26 Mitchell, G., (1999). Making peace: The inside story of the making of the Good Friday Agreement, William Heinemann Ltd.
- 27 McWilliams, M., Kilmurray, A., (2015) [From the global to the local: Grounding UNSCAR 1325 on women, peace and security in post conflict policy making](#), Women’s Studies International Forum
- 28 Fricker, A., (2007), Epistemic injustice power and the ethics of knowing, Oxford University Press
- 29 The ECHR is entirely independent of the EU, it is an international treaty between the Council of Europe (founded by the Treaty of London in 1949 largely as a response to the Holocaust). This includes Article 14 ECHR on non-discrimination. [Guide on Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights and on Article 1 of the Protocol No.12 to the Convention](#). European Court of Human Rights.
- 30 de Mars, S., Murray, C., O’Donoghue, A and Warwick, B (2020) [Continuing EU Citizenship “Rights, Opportunities and Benefits” in Northern Ireland after Brexit](#)
- 31 Liberty, (Accessed June 2023) [What is the ECHR and why does it matter?](#)
- 32 Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, (2021), [Working Paper: The Scope of Article 2\(1\) of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland](#)
- 33 Green, A (2022), [How the Good Friday Agreement means the United Kingdom government cannot leave the ECHR \(without breaching the Good Friday Agreement\)](#), David Allen Green Blog. see also: Patterson, J (2022) [Doesn’t the government know that leaving the ECHR would breach the Good Friday Agreement?](#), The New Statesman.
- 34 McCrudden, C. (2017) [The Good Friday Agreement, Brexit, and Rights](#). (A Royal Irish Academy – British Academy Brexit Briefing). Royal Irish Academy/British Academy.
- 35 Ruane, J., Todd, J., (1999), After the Good Friday Agreement: Analysing Political Change in Northern Ireland: Analysing Political Change in Northern Ireland, University College Dublin Press; Side, K., (2009), Irish Political Studies
- 36 Whitaker, R., (1998), [Debating Rights in the New Northern Ireland](#), Irish Political Studies

## Section 75

Equality issues were subsequently addressed in Section 75 of The Northern Ireland Act 1998, which creates a ‘statutory obligation on public authorities in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between the nine equality categories of persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; men and women generally; persons with a disability and persons without; and persons with dependants and persons without’.<sup>37</sup> While not all equality issues are covered in Section 75 (e.g. anti-discrimination is handled separately), Section 75 places positive duties on public authorities to have due regard for the promotion of equality of opportunity in the formulation of policy and regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between, among others, different racial groups, as well as people of different religious beliefs and political opinions.<sup>38</sup> This concept of ‘good relations’ supersedes the essentialised idea of community relations that persisted for a long time in Northern Ireland.<sup>39</sup>

## The Women, Peace and Security agenda

The United Nations Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has direct applicability to Northern Ireland as a post-conflict society. The specific provisions in terms of both the protection and participation of women in public life, have direct relevance given the destabilising effect Brexit has had on the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement.<sup>40</sup> The issues of protection and participation, particularly in Northern Ireland, are also inseparable, with protection providing the means for women to participate in the political sphere.<sup>41</sup> As one of our interviewees highlighted, Brexit is a WPS issue, because it has impacted the peacebuilding process in Northern Ireland, while women have been marginalised from representation in Brexit negotiations and broader discussions:

---

37 Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, (2010), [Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998: A guide for Public Authorities](#), Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. The duty applies to designated public bodies only.

38 Under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, designated public authorities also have a statutory duty to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion and racial group in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland.

39 McAreavey (2015) Minority and majority community integration in Northern Ireland: a spectrum of tolerance in Honohan, I. and Rougier, N. (eds) *Tolerance and Diversity in Ireland – North and South*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp.114-134.

40 Doyle, J., Connolly, E. (2019). The Effects of Brexit on the Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Peace Process. In: Baciu, CA., Doyle, J. (eds) *Peace, Security and Defence Cooperation in Post-Brexit Europe*. Springer, Cham.

41 Turner, C., Swaine, A., (2021), [At the Nexus of Participation and Protection: Protection-Related Barriers to Women’s Participation in Northern Ireland](#), International Peace Institute

And quite a lot of the work that I do on WPS is [to say] that we can't talk about peacebuilding unless we talk about all the other things that women face. So, you know, access to childcare, so they can choose whether to work, equal pay, you know.. basically, the whole range of issues for gender equality, and we can't separate peace from that... if women have no role in policy and decision making then we don't have an inclusive, peaceful society, we have a system where half the population is side-lined from that. And that's the line that the [women's] sector has generally taken on WPS. It's about women at all tables. So in terms of Brexit it is [relevant and] we've talked a lot about that. **Interview.**

The UK's latest, National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security, revised for the fifth time in 2023<sup>42</sup>, recognises the agenda's applicability in a domestic context for the first time. In so doing it takes on recommendations for an approach accounting both for the shared challenges across the UK and the Northern Ireland specific dynamics. However, it does not go as far as to acknowledge the post-conflict nature of Northern Ireland and the legacy of 'The Troubles'.

### Legal context for Brexit in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is unique in the UK in that it shares a land border with an EU state. Concerns have been raised that not only does Brexit threaten the extent and delivery of the wide range of rights afforded to citizens in Northern Ireland, but it also has implications on the remedies available for enforcing those rights.<sup>43</sup> Due to the operation of Article 4 of the Withdrawal Agreement and s7A of the EU (Withdrawal) Act 2018, and the Protocol, some EU law has supremacy in NI, and this means that national rights cannot be reduced below EU standards.<sup>44</sup> The historical context of Northern Ireland creates further implications should those human rights protections be eroded with, as yet, unknown consequences.

The legal framework for exploring 'the actual, perceived and potential socioeconomic impacts of the UK's withdrawal from the EU on women in Northern Ireland' lies within Protocol (Windsor Framework) Article 2<sup>45</sup>, which sets out the UK Government's commitments on equality and human rights post Brexit. In so doing it sustains the importance of equality and human rights commitments as set out in the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. Protocol Article 2 states that there will be no diminution of rights, safeguards or equality of opportunity as set out in Chapter Six

42 UK Government, (Accessed June 2023) [UK women, peace and security national action plan 2023 to 2027](#),

43 McCrudden, C. (2017) The Good Friday Agreement, Brexit, and Rights. (A Royal Irish Academy – British Academy Brexit Briefing). Royal Irish Academy/British Academy. <https://www.ria.ie/news/policy-andinternational-relations/ria-british-academy-brexit-briefing-paper-series>

44 McCrudden, C. (2017) The Good Friday Agreement, Brexit, and Rights. (A Royal Irish Academy – British Academy Brexit Briefing). Royal Irish Academy/British Academy. <https://www.ria.ie/news/policy-andinternational-relations/ria-british-academy-brexit-briefing-paper-series>

45 UK Government, (2020) [Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland \('Protocol Article 2'\) to the EU Withdrawal Agreement](#)

of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement as a result of Brexit. In addition to upholding commitments to these 1998 provisions through non-diminution obligations, Annex 1 of the Protocol sets out six areas of EU law where ‘dynamic alignment’ is to be maintained, meaning that law in Northern Ireland must reflect changes to the six listed equality Directives.<sup>46</sup> In addition to the Article 2 commitment, the Windsor Framework seeks to avoid a hard border by allowing Northern Ireland to benefit from EU free movement of goods and customs rules even though it is formally outside the EU.<sup>47</sup>

### The economy and employment

The impact of Brexit on the economy in Northern Ireland and the potential for a disproportionate impact on women as a result, is discussed more fully in Chapter 7 of this report. The following summary is provided for context.

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency data provides an overview of the economy. They show how the service sector accounts for just over half of economic activity in Northern Ireland and (excluding those who are self-employed), the private sector accounts for around three-quarters of jobs. Although the relative proportion of public sector jobs has declined, the numbers employed in the public sector has remained similar to 2007 levels; similarly, the number of private sector jobs has increased.<sup>48</sup> But it is worth noting that the population increased over this period, from 2001-2011 by 7.4% and then by 5.0% between 2011 and 2021.<sup>49</sup>

Over half (51%) of employed women in 2021 were employed within the public administration, education, and health sectors and a further sixth (17%) were employed within the hospitality sector.<sup>50</sup> Occupational segregation exists within the NI public sector. For example, in 2017, men held the majority (79.0%) of Chief Executive roles (vertical segregation); men dominated the following roles: operations (70.4%); corporate services (65.5%); strategy, policy and development (64.0%); and finance (63.9%) (horizontal segregation).<sup>51</sup> A consistent feature of the labour market in Northern Ireland is the higher employment and unemployment rates for men and higher economic inactivity rates for women.<sup>52</sup>

---

46 Craig, S., Deb, A., Frantziou, E., Horne, A., Murray, C., Rice, C., Rooney, R (2022) [European Union Developments in Equality and Human Rights: The Impact of Brexit on the Divergence of Rights and Best Practice on the Island of Ireland](#)

47 Murray, C and Robb, N (2023) [From the Protocol to the Windsor Framework](#), Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly.

48 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2023) [NI Economy & Labour Market: A summary of key statistics](#), NISRA website

49 Office of National Statistics (2022) [Population estimates for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2021](#) ONS website

50 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, (2022), [Women in Northern Ireland 2020/21](#), NISRA

51 Ballantine, J., Banks, G., Wall, T., Haynes, K., Manochin, M., (2017) [Gender Equality in the Northern Ireland Public Sector - a View from the Top](#), Northern Ireland Assembly Website

52 According to the [NI Labour Force Survey](#), just under one third of working age women in Northern Ireland were economically inactive in 2021, compared to a quarter of working age men. Rates are consistently higher for women, with the most common reasons including looking after family and home (28% for economically inactive women compared to 6% of economically inactive men).

## European funding in Northern Ireland

Chapter 8 of this report explores the impact of the loss of EU funding on women and the women's sector in Northern Ireland more fully, with the following summary provided as context. During its membership of the European Union and recognising the peripheral and marginal nature of its economy, Northern Ireland benefited from various programmes<sup>53</sup> and structural funds<sup>54</sup> that sought to balance growth between core and periphery regions. Additionally, the European Union designated Northern Ireland as a region emerging from conflict, setting aside dedicated funds to support the transition through the PEACE programme, to which the UK Government contributes. This programme greatly supported women with the first engaging approximately 800 women; the second commissioning the baseline study on UNSCR 1325 (UN Security Council Resolution on Women Peace and Security); and the third engaging policymakers and NGOs involved in decision making on peace and security issues.<sup>55</sup>

The withdrawal of the UK from the EU meant that, from the end of the transition period following Brexit, the UK became ineligible for any new EU structural funding (and programme spend will terminate at the end of 2023). However, Peace Plus will continue to be delivered through The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) between 2021-2027, supporting activities that contribute to a prosperous and stable society in Northern Ireland and the border counties.<sup>56</sup> SEUPB will be responsible for overseeing the fund and is being supported by the European Commission, the Irish Government, the UK Government and the NI Executive. The funds have typically been implemented at the local level through intermediary bodies and across a range of programmes allowing for very local expertise to influence how funds were allocated.

After Brexit the UK Government announced UK funding programmes to replace EU structural funding - these include the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF), Levelling-up Fund and the Community Renewal Fund. These funds are part of the UK Government's "Levelling Up" policy which the UK Government claims will focus on improving living standards, growing the private sector, increasing and spreading

53 Including LEADER, INTERREG, PEACE

54 Including European Regional Development Funds (ERDF), European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAGGF) and European Social Funds (ESF). ESF was focused on targeting skills and training development resulting in the alleviation of poverty and social exclusion. It helped prepare individuals to participate in the labour market and it supported the development of new businesses. The work undertaken by ESF had a wider social impact and its absence is likely to be felt across different public bodies, e.g. health (O'Connell, R., Cunningham, T., (2022) [Impact of Brexit on Section 75 Equality Groups in Northern Ireland: EU Funding](#), Equality Commission of Northern Ireland). ERDF contributed towards research and innovation, infrastructure and technological development (Department for the Economy, (2020) [An Impact Evaluation of the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme, 2014-20](#)). Meanwhile EAGGF funds were channelled largely towards supporting farm payments, with a residual amount of money going towards rural development initiatives.

55 McWilliams M., Kilmurray, A., (2015) [From the global to the local: Grounding UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security in post conflict policy making](#), Women's Studies International Forum

56 including activities that promote peace and reconciliation and contribute to the cross border economic and territorial development of the region



opportunity across the country.<sup>57</sup> The UK Government states that this will provide power to local communities to lead projects to address issues within their locality:

We recognise that each area has its unique challenges requiring unique solutions. So each pilot will empower places to explore how best to tackle local challenges— whether through building skills, supporting local businesses, supporting communities and places, or providing employment support – to build communities where people want to live, work and visit, while allowing government to evaluate how best to ensure levelling up right across the country.<sup>58</sup>

According to the UK Government the primary goal of the SPF is to build pride of place and increase life chances across the UK; priorities are Community and Place (e.g. town centres and high street, capital spending and running costs); Supporting Local Business; People and Skills (reducing levels of economic inactivity). The other funds are the Community Renewal Fund (CRF) and the Levelling Up Fund, both of which are implemented/managed by the UK Government’s Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. CRF (2021-22) is to bridge the gap between the end of EU funding and SPF and will provide revenue funding helping to bridge the gap between the end of EU funding and the start of the new UKSPF, even if this falls short of the levels of EU funding.<sup>59</sup>

The first round of Community Renewal Funds (CRF) were allocated to large entities, including the largest award in Northern Ireland going to an Oxfordshire-based call centre.<sup>60</sup> In that first round<sup>61</sup>, £12m was allocated for projects in Northern Ireland; £1.8m being the largest grant and being spent on a business training programme championed by four councils but, as mentioned above, being led by a private sector company based in Oxfordshire.<sup>62</sup> Across the other two strands, one project in Northern Ireland was awarded Community Ownership Funds worth £300,000 (Glens Digital Hub) and seven projects were awarded Levelling Up funds. The latter are largely infrastructure projects e.g. Dundonald Ice Bowl, an electric vehicle charging network and a cycling development project. As yet it is unclear how these new funds will ensure that they dovetail with other policies including Shared Island and Peace programmes, this being a very real fear held among many of those who we spoke with who are active in the third sector.

---

57 UK Government, (Accessed May 2023) [Press release, Government to publish Levelling Up White Paper](#)

58 UK Government, (Accessed May 2023) [UK Community Renewal Fund: prospectus 2021-22](#)

59 Brien, P., (2022) [The UK Shared Prosperity Fund](#), UK Parliament House of Commons Library

60 McAleer, R., (2022) [GB centre is NI’s biggest recipient under new London-controlled fund to replace EU aid](#), The Irish Times

61 UK Government, (Accessed May 2023) [New levelling up and community investments](#)

62 Campbell, J., (2021) [NI projects given £12m in funding to replace EU aid](#), BBC News; UK Government, (Accessed May 2023) [£12 million for skills and local businesses in Northern Ireland](#)

SPF was launched in 2022 and is in addition to the Levelling Up Fund which is a capital investment funding stream of £4.8 billion which will invest in infrastructure across the UK and will be led by local authorities. It aims to support town centres and high street regeneration, local transport projects and cultural and heritage assets.

Despite government rhetoric of local power to influence what is happening, the Shared Prosperity Fund is very much a centralised fund, which can be spent under the UK Government new powers as set out in the UK Internal Market (UKIM) Act (2020). According to Sargeant and Stojanovic<sup>63</sup> (2021, p.5):

The UKIM Act gives UK ministers broad powers to provide financial assistance to any part of the UK for the purposes of promoting economic development, providing infrastructure, supporting cultural and sporting activities, and supporting education and training activities and exchanges. In these instances, the UK government could spend money directly in devolved policy areas, which it is expected to do through the allocation of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which will replace EU structural funds.

They go on to note that the Act amends the devolution statutes which gives the UK government power to design and implement public subsidies to replace EU funding.

Previous research has highlighted that more funds should be allocated to Northern Ireland based on greater need - currently it receives 3% funds which are allocated according to share of the population rather than on status/disadvantage (this compares to ESF where Northern Ireland received circa 5% of the share).<sup>64</sup> Although questions have been raised as described above, and in many of our interviews, about the overall amount of funding that is replacing EU funds, SPF seeks to replace ESF and ERDF. The UK Government claims that this is roughly the same across the three-year period (2022-25), a matter verified by the House of Commons Library.<sup>65</sup> Research by various different bodies has raised concerns over how much funding will be allocated to Northern Ireland and whether it will be based on need.<sup>66</sup> At the end of March 2023, on the day that European Social Funding came to an end, the UK Government announced an additional £15m funding package through the UK SPF.

63 Sargeant, J and Stojanovic, A (2021) The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. Institute for Government.

64 O'Connell, R., Cunningham, T., (2022) [Impact of Brexit on Section 75 Equality Groups in Northern Ireland: EU Funding](#), Equality Commission of Northern Ireland

65 Brien, P., (2022) [The UK Shared Prosperity Fund](#), UK Parliament House of Commons Library

66 O'Connell, R., Cunningham, T., (2022) [Impact of Brexit on Section 75 Equality Groups in Northern Ireland: EU Funding](#), Equality Commission of Northern Ireland; Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment, (2021) [Future funding for disability employment services](#), Triangle Housing; Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, [ESF User Group Briefing Paper, November 2021](#), page 8. Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2022). [Policy Recommendations: Impact of Brexit on Section 75 Equality Groups in Northern Ireland: EU Funding, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland](#), page 25 and page 38.

## 2. Women's Voices on Brexit

---

### 2.1 Where are the women speaking on Brexit?

The marginalisation of women from discussions on Brexit happened early on. During the referendum campaigns women only accounted for 25.3% of all individual expert sources included in television coverage, falling to 15.4% in the press, while women were also underrepresented accounting for just 39.1% in press coverage.<sup>67</sup> Writing at the time, Hastrup, Guerrina and Wright<sup>68</sup>, drew attention to the fact that 'the campaigns continue to be dominated by male 'experts' and a presumption that women will vote on the basis of emotive issues of special interest to them, such as 'maternity leave policies'. In addition, there remains a preoccupation among the media in getting the 'top expert', often conflated in gendered terms with getting the 'top man'.<sup>69</sup>

Linked to the absence of women from the debates was the absence of women's perspectives on the core issues which came to dominate the campaigns, specifically trade, defence and immigration. Yet when the absence of women became noticeable, discussion turned to so-called 'women's issues' and the areas in which the EU had showed obvious competence, e.g. social policy.<sup>70</sup>

This gendered pattern has been replicated in academia both in the marginalisation of women as experts but also of gender expertise<sup>71</sup>, whereby such expertise remains siloed and is 'tapped' only for occasions such as International Women's Day but remains absent from mainstream discussion.<sup>72</sup> This matters because the way Brexit is studied, including what is prioritised by academia, ultimately contributes to the shape Brexit takes by informing public discourse and policy makers' priorities, including vis-a-vis women in Northern Ireland.<sup>73</sup>

---

67 Loughborough University CRCC Blog (2016) [Media Coverage of the EU Referendum](#). Report 5

68 Hastrup, T., Guerrina, R., Wright, K.A.M., (2016) [Women in the Brexit Debate: Still Largely Confined to 'Low' Politics](#), *LSE Brexit Blog*

69 Ibid.

70 Hastrup, T., Wright, K.A.M., Guerrina, R., (2019) [Bringing Gender In? EU Foreign and Security Policy after Brexit](#), *Politics and Governance*

71 Hastrup, T., Guerrina, R., Wright, K.A.M., (2016) [Women in the Brexit Debate: Still Largely Confined to 'Low' Politics](#), *LSE Brexit Blog*

72 Guerrina, R., Hastrup, T., Wright, K.A.M., Masselot, A., MacRae, H., Cavaghan, R., (2018), [Does European Union Studies Have a Gender Problem? Experiences from Researching Brexit](#), *International Feminist Journal of Politics*

73 Ibid.

## 2.2 Targeting abuse at women speaking on Brexit

...women [are] being told that they don't understand, and they don't really get Brexit... and so [should] be quiet. **Focus Group.**

This quote from a focus group participant is an example of the perception amongst some women that they are not able to speak about Brexit publicly. It is reflective of wider research on Northern Ireland which identifies how women in public life 'experience persistent low levels of gendered intimidation which fall outside the scope of the law and its related security policy'.<sup>74</sup>

The research identified difficulties with women academics speaking on Brexit in Northern Ireland. There was a perception amongst some we interviewed that women academics and others faced a particular backlash when researching Brexit. This is because it was perceived of as a highly charged political issue mapping onto sectarian lines and thus such targeting had misogynist undertones. While the intimidation of researchers in Northern Ireland is an issue which has impacted men<sup>75</sup> along with women, it is one on which many women do not feel able to talk publicly, for fear of exacerbating the issue, therefore limiting their recourse to support. Such experiences of intimidation targeting women can easily be 'rendered invisible, and even seem irrational, to others who do not share that experience'.<sup>76</sup>

A key obstacle to women speaking on Brexit is therefore the level of abuse and intimidation, including but not limited to on social media, directed towards those in the public sphere. This includes abuse targeted at women MLAs, MPs, commentators and academics speaking publicly about Brexit and also of course intersecting with race and class.<sup>77</sup> As a participant in our expert seminar noted:

...it's different for women to contribute to the debate around [Brexit] than it is for men, and the vitriol that can come as a consequence of saying things that are just evidence based or factual. **Expert Seminar.**

The threats to and abuse of women speaking on politics in Northern Ireland today is something that has been noted by Simon Hoare MP, Chair of the Northern Ireland Committee:<sup>78</sup>

74 Turner and Swaine, (2023) 'Law, Language and the Power of "Invisible Threats" of Violence Against Women'. *Journal of Law and Society*.

75 BBC News (2022) [Colin Harvey: A target has been put on my back, says Queen's academic.](#)

76 Turner and Swaine, (2023) 'Law, Language and the Power of "Invisible Threats" of Violence Against Women'. *Journal of Law and Society*.

77 O'Dwyer, M., (2018) [Making Sense of Austerity: The Gendered Ideas of European Economic Policy](#), *Comparative European Politics*

78 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2023). Commons Committee in Belfast for sessions on effect of paramilitary activity on women, and cost of living

I want to point out that the last time we had an all-woman panel, there was an unacceptable level of social media abuse and threat. Let me make again the points that I made following that incident, which came as a huge shock and surprise to all of us... They [the perpetrators] will not be champions of democracy; they will not be champions of what we would all describe as basic values of civility and good manners.

Such abuse can be invisible, operating below the law, but yet is strongly felt by women in their day-to-day lives in Northern Ireland.<sup>79</sup> It can also be highly visible, for example, the murder of MP Jo Cox days before the Brexit referendum, inspired by misogynist white supremacy.<sup>80</sup> Abuse and the threat of violence has also been documented as being experienced by academic experts on Brexit, particularly women and other minoritized groups.<sup>81</sup>

Women, and minority ethnic women in particular, are more likely to face abuse when speaking about politics<sup>82</sup>, and Brexit is no exception. For example, Gina Miller, who took the government to the Supreme Court in a high-profile case, has openly discussed the racist and misogynistic abuse she has received as a woman of colour and migrant.<sup>83</sup> As Miller noted:

What is so alarming to me and I didn't anticipate, is the level at which that abuse is targeted at me because I am a woman of colour and because I supposedly have no right as somebody who has come to the United Kingdom to have a voice.<sup>84</sup>

### 2.3 Racism and a rise in hate crime

The targeting of women in politics or speaking on issues deemed 'political' is nothing new in Northern Ireland and is by no means solely related to Brexit. For example, the gendered abuse that the women involved in the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement received has been well documented.<sup>85</sup> However, the research identified a perception that the rhetoric around Brexit has further aggravated the issue.

---

79 Turner, C., Swaine, A., (forthcoming) [Law, language and the power of 'Invisible Threats' of Violence against women](#), Journal of Law and Society

80 Jones, J (2019) More in common: the domestication of misogynist white supremacy and the assassination of Jo Cox, Ethnic and Racial Studies

81 Galpin, C and Vernon, P. (2023) Post-Truth Politics as Discursive Violence: Online Abuse, the Public Sphere, and the Figure of 'The Expert', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*.

82 Amnesty International, (accessed May 2023), [Black and Asian women MPs abused more online](#); Southern, R., Harmer, E. (2019). Othering Political Women: Online Misogyny, Racism and Ableism Towards Women in Public Life. In: Lumsden, K., Harmer, E. (eds) *Online Othering*. Palgrave Studies in Cybercrime and Cybersecurity. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

83 BBC News, (Accessed May 2023) [Gina Miller on Abuse She Faced over Brexit Legal Challenges](#)

84 *ibid*.

85 McWilliams, M. (2021) *Stand Up, Speak Out: My Life Working for Women's Rights, Peace and Equality in Northern Ireland and Beyond*. Blackstaff publishing.

Women in the focus groups talked about the ‘pushback and hate’ that were directed to women when they spoke out meaning that they become less likely to speak openly, thus creating silence around issues impacting women. As a woman from a focus group explains here, and her perceptions mirror those of a significant number of the women we spoke to:

When the vote was happening for Brexit, there was a lot of rhetoric around - there was a lot of propaganda and.. there were.. marginalized communities that would have been targeted. And I think that also had ripple effects here. In terms of.. the rhetoric that was used for people to vote to leave the EU. So that probably has indirect effects as well. **Focus Group.**

The following discussion between two women in one of the focus groups also shows a perception of a link between a rise in racism and Brexit, something many of the women in our focus groups pointed to.

[Participant 1] I’m very mindful of BME communities who live here and how they feel. I’ve had a few conversations where I’m really shocked at the level of racism and the way Brexit had kind of...

[Participant 2] It kind of opened the doors for that.. I didn’t actually realize in some cases that people felt that way and don’t feel as welcome and are very wary. You know it’s created a discomfort, people that might have been living here a long time. You know, made it their home. And now actually feel quite uneasy...**Focus Group.**

The evidence supports these women’s perceptions. Research conducted in 2023 by the ECNI on the impact of Brexit on minority ethnic and migrant people<sup>86</sup> revealed a widespread perception that Brexit led to an increase in the expression of racism, and that Brexit had been referred to as a ‘trigger event’ for racist abuse. It also identified that women research participants felt that they had been the focus of racism more than men due to being at the ‘frontline of community interactions’. Whilst race related crime reported to PSNI overall had been lower in the years since the EU Referendum, it increased in 2020/21 and 2021/22, though it is important to note that hate crime in Northern Ireland is underreported.<sup>87</sup> Although there was a fall in levels of race hate crime/incidents in 2022/23<sup>88</sup>, the increase in race hate crime and incidents, particularly in 2021/22 is deeply concerning. For example, the number of racist incidents recorded in 2021/22 is the second

---

86 Pivotal (2023) [Impact of Brexit on Minority Ethnic and Migrant People in Northern Ireland](#). ECNI

87 Ibid.

88 Police Service of Northern Ireland (2023) [Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland](#). Update to 31 March 2023

highest<sup>89</sup> since 2004/5, while the number of racist crimes recorded in 2021/22 is the highest.<sup>90</sup> This trend of an increase in hate crime in Northern Ireland should also be considered in the context of research on the UK as a whole, which has identified a causal link between the Brexit referendum and an increase in hate crime on a par with terrorist attacks<sup>91</sup>, supporting wider research that finds significant discrete events can trigger an increase in hate crimes.<sup>92</sup> Brexit has therefore had a particular impact on the lived experiences of minority ethnic women in Northern Ireland.

In Northern Ireland this rise in race hate crime has taken place against a particular post-conflict context which has exacerbated existing tensions and is perceived to have legitimised paramilitaries to carry out violence, something which has been shown to have a particular impact on young women.<sup>93</sup> This was something a number of women perceived, and is summarised by a participant in our expert seminar:

I would just raise the relationship between on the one hand xenophobic attitudes and race hate crime in Northern Ireland, but also race hate crime is occurring within a broader context of paramilitary coercive control in communities, and how... Brexit rhetoric around the Northern Ireland Protocol, the collapse of the Assembly has legitimized those paramilitaries to carry out... [violence] **Expert Seminar.**

## 2.4 Summary and recommendations

### Summary

Women have been marginalised from media coverage of Brexit since the run up to the referendum in 2016. When women have been included, often they are asked to speak on perceived 'women's issues', rather than the core issues which have defined the focus of the Brexit debate, namely trade, defence and immigration. These patterns have been replicated in academia whereby gender expertise on Brexit has been siloed, further contributing to the side-lining of both women's expertise and expertise on the impact of Brexit on women.

---

89 There were 1,336 racist incidents recorded in 2014/15

90 Police Service of Northern Ireland, (Accessed June 2023), [Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland: Update to 31st March 2022](#)

91 Devine, D. (2021). [Discrete Events and Hate Crimes: The Causal Role of the Brexit Referendum](#), Social Science Quarterly

92 King, R.D., Sutton, G.M., (2013), [High Times for Hate Crimes: Explaining the Temporal Clustering of Hate-Motivated Offending](#), Criminology; Disha, I., Cavendish, J.C., King, R.D., (2011), [Historical Events and Spaces of Hate: Hate Crimes against Arabs and Muslims in Post-9/11 America](#), Social Problems

93 Research on paramilitary violence is usually focused on the impact on men and boys, see for example, Ashe, F., and Harland, K. (2014) 'Troubling Masculinities: Changing Patterns of Violent Masculinities in a Society emerging from Conflict'. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37 (9): 747-762. For a counterbalance to this see for example Siobhán McAlister, Gail Neill, Nicola Carr & Clare Dwyer (2022) Gender, violence and cultures of silence: young women and paramilitary violence, *Journal of Youth Studies*. For a discussion of the link between Brexit, the impasse over the Protocol and Windsor Framework and a potential rise in paramilitary activity see: Pogatchnik, S (2022) [Brexit deadlock in Northern Ireland risks rekindling violence](#), experts warn, *Politico*

The abuse of women in public life in Northern Ireland oftentimes occurs at a level which falls outside the scope of the law, but nevertheless is felt strongly by women. It also intersects with racism and is felt particularly by minority ethnic women. This has impacted the ability of women to engage publicly with debate and discussions on Brexit, including within academia. The perception that Brexit has exacerbated racism has further heightened this challenge.

Significantly, evidence suggests a perception that the rise in race hate crime can be attributed to Brexit as a trigger event and that Brexit has had a particular impact on the lived experiences of minority ethnic women in Northern Ireland. The normalisation of xenophobia and racism is also perceived by women to be linked to an increase in paramilitary activity, which has particular impacts on young women.

## Recommendations

- a) **Commission research into the impact of Brexit on specific groups.** ECNI and relevant NI Departments, including the Department for Communities, The Executive Office, and the Department for Justice, should commission more specific research into the impact of Brexit on particular groups of women in Northern Ireland, including women who are non-EU nationals; women subjected to domestic violence; women who have no recourse to public funds; women who are asylum seekers/refugees; and minority ethnic and migrant women who are subjected to race hate crime. This is to address the need for specialist advice pertaining to these groups to inform future policy. Following this research, action should be taken to address the matters identified therein.



## 3. Consultations with the Women's Sector

---

### 3.1 UK and EU consultations with the women's sector

...what we've basically been saying [is] 'where's the woman's perspective in any of this?' 'How do you engage with women?' And even beyond that 'how do you engage with people on the on the ground?' Because I think certainly ...over the last year when the discussions of the Protocol were heaviest, there was that sense, certainly in women that things are happening *to* them, and not *with* them. And that was creating additional tension. **Interview.**

This quote from one of our interviews demonstrates the perception that the women and the women's sector have not been engaged on Brexit. At the negotiating level women have been noticeable by their absence from both the UK and EU sides.<sup>94</sup> This is perhaps unsurprising given that 'diplomacy is intimately linked to gender and the practices of exclusion and inclusion of women and men over time'.<sup>95</sup> There is no indication that critical actors working for gender equality were considered in the design of the negotiations and in areas of policy cooperation after the UK's withdrawal from the EU, despite evidence that critical actors are needed to effect positive impact.<sup>96</sup>

This absence is reflected beyond high-level negotiations, to the consultations which inform them, with limited inclusion of women or the women's sector. The nature of consultations with the women's sector has also been piecemeal, rather than systematic and consistent. The 8th periodic review of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Committee stressed in relation to Brexit 'that placing women's rights at the heart of its [the UK's] deliberations and ensuring that women's rights are strengthened will result in creating a stronger and more resilient society'.<sup>97</sup> Despite this, the UK government did not consult any of the civil society organisations involved in the CEDAW process, including the Northern Ireland Women's Platform, in submitting its most recent progress report.<sup>98</sup>

---

94 Hastrup, T., Wright, K., & Guerrina, R. (2019). Bringing Gender In? EU Foreign and Security Policy after Brexit. *Politics and Governance*, 7(3), 62-71.

95 Aggestam, K and Towns, A (2019) 'The Gender Turn in Diplomacy: A New Research Agenda', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*.

96 Childs, s and Krook, M L (2009) 'Analysing Women's Substantive Representation: From Critical Mass to Critical Actors', *Government and Opposition* 44, no. 2: 125-45.

97 UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, (2019) [Concluding observations on the 8th periodic report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#), UN Digital Library

98 Engender (Accessed June 2023) [CEDAW: how are the UK and Scottish Governments responding to the recommendations?](#) Engender blog

The women's sector, where they are consulted, represent a small proportion of those the UK and EU has sought to engage with. A report by Corporate Europe Observatory and Global Justice now shows that both the UK and EU prioritised meetings with corporate lobbyists, at the expense of the third sector. For example, over 90% of all meetings held by Department for International Trade ministers were with corporate lobbyists, compared to third sector organisations who were represented in just 3% of meetings. Within the EU, 72% of meetings which Chief Negotiator Michel Barnier and his taskforce held were with corporate interest representatives, where finance sector and food/agriculture sector dominated.<sup>99</sup> It also identified a significant lack of transparency around such meetings making it difficult to know who attended and what was discussed, with both UK and EU decision makers refusing to release participant lists, agendas and minutes.<sup>100</sup>

There was some ad hoc engagement from the UK Government with the third and women's sector but not in a sustained manner. For example, an ESF user group that was in existence before Brexit, from 2019 became focused on the replacement of EU funds. Convened by a third sector organisation, it also facilitated consultation with the UK government (post Brexit):

So [the Secretary of State] did come and engage with that group kind of, basically, it was an open invitation. So they did do about three engagements with that group. It's probably the only significant kind of consultation they did with our sector via that group. **Interview.**

The quality of consultation with the women's sector on Brexit is also variable, as one of the interviewees explains, they often perceive their time is not valued and are not clear on how their engagement in consultation informs policy processes:

..there's no feedback circle, there's no, right, here's what we're doing.. and then the next meeting is just the same again [and] the style of how they do things like, you get a request on a Monday saying can you come to a meeting at four o'clock on Wednesday, assuming we have nothing else to do, but then... sometimes it gets cancelled, again, with very short notice. **Interview.**

Another related concern is that when women were consulted on Brexit, they report not being listened to.

---

99 Corporate Europe Observatory and Global Justice Now, (2017) [Big Business Britain Part Two: How Corporate Lobbyists Dominate Secret Meetings with Brexit Negotiators in London and Brussels](#) Corporate Europe Observatory

100 *ibid.*

[policy makers are] just doing this tickbox consultation. But it's kind of worse than that, isn't it, that there isn't even any kind of resourcing for you to support members or even go to members and work out what Brexit means to them.

**Interview.**

This quote highlights two challenges to consultations with the women's sector over Brexit. First, when the women's sector is consulted it is perceived as a 'tickbox' exercise rather than a meaningful way for them to feed into policymaking. Second, such consultations are not accompanied by any additional resourcing being made available for relevant organisations to consult their members and to understand Brexit.

The perception of the marginalisation of women in policymaking is borne out elsewhere. Research has highlighted how since Brexit women's interest groups have lost access to the policymaking arena at the EU level and at the same time it has been more difficult to affect change nationally.<sup>101</sup>

## 3.2 Summary and recommendations

### Summary

There has been a lack of women, or critical actors working for gender equality, involved in the Brexit negotiations. This is reflected in consultations, where both the EU and UK have prioritised meetings with corporate lobbyists over the third sector, including the women's sector. The lack of transparency on who is invited to these meetings and their agendas is a further challenge to understanding if, and how, issues impacting women might be discussed.

When the women's sector is consulted there are further barriers to their meaningful engagement. First, a perception that they are not meaningfully listened to and second, a lack of resources for their organisations to properly consult their members on their views on Brexit.

---

101 Sanders, A. (2023) [What does Brexit mean for the future of gender equality?](#) LSE blog.

## Recommendations

- b) **Fund the women's sector.** Even in a context of reduced public expenditure, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Northern Ireland Office as co-signatories of the Fifth National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security should consider mechanisms to effectively support the women's sector in NI, including the provision of direct core funding to women's groups. This would help support their role in future consultations, including in relation to the implementation of the Protocol amended by the Windsor Framework, but also on an ongoing basis to monitor the impact of Brexit, including on women.
- 
- c) **Regularly and meaningfully consult the women's sector.** The UK Government and UK Departments, NI Executive and NI Departments, should ensure regular, meaningful, and structured engagement with the NI women's sector, from the outset in future consultations, including in relation to the implementation of the Protocol/Windsor Framework but also on an ongoing basis to monitor the impact of Brexit, including on women. They should ensure that the needs of women are taken into account in the development and delivery of post Brexit legislation, policies, and services. There should also be regular, meaningful, and structured engagement with the Northern Ireland women's sector by the EU on the impact of Brexit, including on women.

## 4. Indirect Impacts and the Political Impasse

---

### 4.1 Violence against women

Well, I mean, we don't have a functioning government here. The collapse was inherently linked to Brexit, and the Protocol and everything. So yeah, it definitely indirectly affects all of us in Northern Ireland, whether we're aware of it or not just because of the political situation. **Focus Group.**

As this focus group participant highlights, Brexit has an indirect impact on the legislative environment in Northern Ireland with the NI Assembly and NI Executive not sitting due to the political impasse over the Protocol. This is felt particularly acutely in relation to the issue of violence against women, where Northern Ireland falls behind England, Scotland and Wales who all have a Strategy in place to address the issue, as this interview draws attention to:

A woman is murdered every other month in the north through domestic abuse and we desperately need a strategy. You know that's something that we haven't had in Northern Ireland....we're the only part of the UK that doesn't have one... **Interview.**

To address this, the NI Executive directed the development of a draft framework for the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (EVAWG) to be coordinated by the Executive Office by the end of 2022.<sup>102</sup> The UK's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security also tasks the NI Executive specifically with the co-design of such a strategy with relevant stakeholders.<sup>103</sup> The initial call for views to inform the EVAWG Strategy was completed in March 2022, and The Executive Office is now - in the summer of 2023 - consulting on the Strategy.<sup>104</sup>

The challenge is that the EVAWG Strategy cannot be implemented without the Assembly sitting, unless Westminster intervenes. This is a politically fraught issue, as one interviewee points to:

---

102 Executive Office Northern Ireland, [Ending Violence Against Women and Girls](#)

103 UK Government (2023) [UK women, peace and security national action plan 2023 to 2027](#).

104 The Executive Office (2023) [Consultation on a Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls and Foundational Action Plan](#).

..anything done in Northern Ireland must be rooted in Northern Ireland and must respect devolved government... UK Government can't really tell the Northern Ireland Assembly or Executive what it needs to do, because that's not the relationship. But the real concern was that it definitely would be very unhelpful if the UK government comes into Northern Ireland and says you need to do X, Y, and Z. **Interview.**

When the women's and third sector have lobbied Westminster politicians over the adoption of a EAWG Strategy, they have met with a stringent response which they perceived as placing Brexit politics (related to the Protocol/Windsor Framework) over women's lives. As one of our participants summarised:

It is very much a party line at the minute just from the current government. Well, they [the Assembly] need to get back to work if you want these legislative changes to come into place. **Interview.**

## 4.2 Other gender-related strategies

In May 2023, the Executive Office highlighted proposed cuts to the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) programmes, which will result in negative impacts on women and girls.<sup>105</sup> It is important that the EVAWG strategy is not just adopted but implemented effectively to ensure that programmes arising from the strategy are effectively resourced across the seven years of the Strategy. The political impasse over the Protocol which has led to the NI Assembly not sitting has resulted in a lack of progression in relation to many of other gender-related strategies. There has been a lack of progression in relation to the Gender Equality Strategy<sup>106</sup> and Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.<sup>107</sup> Both these strategies have the potential, if effectively implemented and adequately resourced, to address key inequalities experienced by women in Northern Ireland, including for example, in the areas of childcare, employment, participation in political and public life, health and social care, and education. Unlike the VAWG Strategy, these strategies have not yet been consulted on. For example, a public consultation on the Gender Equality Strategy was due to take place in early 2022, but this process has been delayed.<sup>108</sup>

105 See Equality Commission for NI, [Briefing Note: Concerns regarding cumulative equality impacts of proposed Departmental Budget allocations for 2023-24 \(equalityni.org\)](#); and [TEO Equality Impact Assessment, The Executive Office's Spending Plans for 2023-2024](#), TEO EQIA, pages 17 & 18

106 [Gender Equality Strategy | Department for Communities \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

107 [Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

108 ECNI and NIHRC (2023) [Annual Report of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission on the Implementation of Article 2 of the Windsor Framework 2022–2023 \(equalityni.org\)](#)

In addition, there are other social inclusion strategies, which have, similarly, not been progressed such as the Disability Strategy<sup>109</sup>, Sexual Orientation Strategy<sup>110</sup> and Anti-Poverty Strategy.<sup>111</sup> Again if effectively implemented and adequately resourced, these strategies may have a positive impact on addressing key inequalities including those experienced by disabled women, LGBTQ+ women and women living in poverty in Northern Ireland. In May 2023, Department for Communities officials informed stakeholders that in the face of spending cuts associated with its budget for 2023-24, work on the Social Inclusion Strategies, including the Gender Equality Strategy, Sexual Orientation Strategy, Disability Strategy and the Anti-Poverty Strategy, would be suspended and staff currently working on these would be redeployed.<sup>112</sup>

In February 2023, the Department for Justice and Department of Health published for consultation, another key gender-related strategy - the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy,<sup>113</sup> which closed in May 2023. This Strategy has the potential to assist in tackling domestic and sexual abuse, including toward women and girls. Like the VAWG Strategy, this strategy cannot be implemented without the Assembly sitting and Ministers and an NI Executive being in place to consider and approve the final strategy.<sup>114</sup> However it should be noted that there is no reference to the impact of Brexit on women in the draft VAWG strategy or in the draft action plan which accompanies that draft strategy.

### 4.3 Summary and recommendations

#### Summary

The political impasse over the Protocol/Windsor Framework which has led to the NI Assembly not sitting has resulted in legislative deadlock and contributed to budgetary issues as referred to in Chapter 8. Brexit has therefore had an indirect impact on addressing violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland, which is the only nation without a strategy in place to address the issue.

It has also had an indirect impact on the finalisation of other key gender related strategies, including the Gender Equality Strategy and Childcare Strategy, that have the potential, if effectively implemented and adequately resourced, to address key inequalities experienced by women in Northern Ireland, including for example, in the areas of childcare, employment, participation in political and public life, health and social care, and education.

---

109 [New Disability Strategy | Department for Communities \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

110 [Sexual Orientation Strategy | Department for Communities \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

111 [Poverty Policy | Department for Communities \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

112 Department for Communities (2023). Budget 2023-2024 Equality Impact Assessment, paragraph 7.4, page 17

113 Department of Health and Department of Justice. [Draft Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy. domestic and sexual abuse strategy 2023 2030 | Department of Justice \(justice-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

114 [Department of Health and Department of Justice. Domestic and sexual abuse strategy. Consultation Summary responses 2023, page 62.](#)

## Recommendations

- d) **Prioritise a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy for NI.** The NI Executive and the Executive Office, should prioritise the adoption and effective resourcing of the Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland Strategy, which addresses the impact of Brexit on women and girls, and if necessary the UK Government should consider introducing the Strategy in the absence of the NI Executive.
- 
- e) **Progress other key gender related strategies for NI.** The NI Executive, and relevant NI Departments, including the Department for Communities and the Department for Education, should as a matter of urgency finalise and implement other key gender related strategies, including an updated/ revised Gender Equality Strategy which should address the impact of Brexit on women and girls.



## 5. Information on Brexit

---

### 5.1 The information vacuum

The research identified an information vacuum which emerged from a combination of misinformation, disinformation and a lack of information which is complicated by the complexity and technocratic nature of discussion concerning leaving the EU. This has shaped both perceptions and the lived experience of how Brexit has been felt by women in Northern Ireland, including among migrant women as we go on to demonstrate.

The proliferation of misinformation in contemporary politics is an issue which is not unique to Northern Ireland nor to Brexit.<sup>115</sup> However, it has particular repercussions for women in relation to Brexit<sup>116</sup>, and in Northern Ireland as we outline below. The misinformation emerged early on in the Brexit campaign and is part of ‘post-truth politics’ which is defined as ‘deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, which is indifferent to facts’.<sup>117</sup> As a focus group participant explains:

I think that (the Brexit campaign) was the start as well, for me where it was acceptable to lie...Or where there was this, actually, you can say anything.

**Focus Group.**

Misinformation was perceived by a significant number of the women we spoke to, to emanate from Government ministers, contributing to a lack of trust in politicians, as summarised here:

The realization there was no plan, and that every single piece of advertising was a lie. Actually, I remember Theresa Villiers coming on TV, and saying, you know, telling people in Northern Ireland, you know, ‘vote leave, this is why’, I remember thinking, like, that’s the secretary - that was the then Secretary of State, saying, you know, I mean, quoting the big bus, you know, the 350 million. All of which we now know was absolute lies. **Focus Group.**

---

115 Hopkin, J., Rosamond, B., (2016) [Post-truth Politics, Bullshit and Bad Ideas: Deficit Fetishism in the UK](#), New Political Economy

116 O’Dwyer, M., (2017) [The Intersectional Politics of Bullshit](#), European Journal of Politics and Gender

117 Hopkin, J., Rosamond, B., (2016) [Post-truth Politics, Bullshit and Bad Ideas: Deficit Fetishism in the UK](#), New Political Economy

## 5.2 Lack of information

...as a service provider that works with the grassroots, with community groups, the extent to which we have to counter misinformation and misconceptions around what people's rights are is really quite troubling... In tight knit migrant communities this becomes increasingly the case, the more kind of disconnected from the system [they are], a community has lower levels of English language and lower levels of knowledge of how to navigate the system, you would have instances of gatekeepers, basically, using information in ways that leverages their own power within the communities. **Expert seminar.**

As this participant from our expert seminar points to, a core part of their work has become countering misinformation and this is an issue which particularly impacts migrant women for whom English is a second language. It also becomes more challenging as a result of the perceived lack of official information on the impact of Brexit for women in Northern Ireland, creating an environment in which misinformation thrives.

The research identified a lack of information on Brexit and its implications for day-to-day life in Northern Ireland from both the UK Government and NI Executive. One focus group participant highlighted how women struggle to understand where to go to find factual information on Brexit for more mundane daily issues they face, particularly in relation to the border with the Republic of Ireland:

... there is also a need for a place to go for information about really practical things like - my partner lives in the Republic of Ireland, so I'm up and down crossing the border quite a lot. And things like, do I need a Green Card for my car to go down south? I don't know, where can I find that out? ...there's just a lot of uncertainty about real practical questions, and there's no mechanism through which you can find out those answers. **Focus Group.**

Building on this, the research identified a particular vulnerability stemming from a lack of information and understanding of the day-to-day impact of Brexit on the border, felt particularly by migrant women as this interview identifies:

...the women [victims of human trafficking] would express to us about how they don't realize the border is there – you're just crossing the path...The shop down the street is in the Republic, and they live in the north, or their back garden is literally in a different jurisdiction. And then the women would say to us that they realize that they have crossed a border because they notice the road signs and the signage changing, you know that's the only thing. **Interview.**

Moreover, advocacy groups found a lack of understanding of Brexit from government too, which has had a particular impact on migrant women. For example, it was raised that migrant women were given incorrect advice from the NHS, as the following focus group participant explains:

...[migrant women] being denied [healthcare] on eligibility grounds, when, in fact, they were eligible, and really having to fight this...**Focus Group.**

This women's experience is not isolated, and extends to minority ethnic women too, as the Women's Resource Development Agency has reported in relation to the provision of Covid-19 vaccinations:

There is evidence of individuals being informed that there are British citizenship requirements for vaccinations. This may be an isolated case but a systemic problem also relates to booking on the HSC COVID-19 online portal which asks questions regarding GP registration and place of residence.<sup>[13]</sup>

People who cannot answer yes to questions on GP and residence are then told that they are not eligible.<sup>118</sup>

Directly related to the lack of accessible information for women on the impact of Brexit on their day-to-day lives, and the failure to understand the implications of Brexit by government officials is the complex and technocratic nature of Brexit, including the legislative agenda accompanying leaving the EU. Here we use technocracy to mean that a particular set of expertise is required to understand information, and it is not accessible to a lay person. This is the fourth element we identify as contributing towards the information vacuum, and which has an impact on upholding women's rights. The complexity and gravity of the issues involved, that is upholding a set of rights for those living in Northern Ireland, demand careful scrutiny and monitoring, within a robust legal framework that will hold involved parties to account. As research commissioned by ECNI, NIHRC and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission identifies<sup>119</sup>:

---

118 Women's Resource Development Agency (2022) [Health Inequalities and Hostile Environment for Migrants and Black and Minority Ethnic People](#).

119 Craig, S., Deb, A., Frantziou, E., Horne, A., Murray, C., Rice, C., Rooney, J., (2022) [European Union Developments in Equality and Human Rights: The Impact of Brexit on the Divergence of Rights and Best Practice on the Island of Ireland](#), Equality Commission for NI, NI Human Rights Commission and Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

The legal framework for rights and equality in Northern Ireland is fragmented in being drawn from multiple legal spheres...The complexity of the legal landscape for equality and human rights in post-Brexit Northern Ireland means that there is a real potential for domestic developments to fail to keep pace with European Union law developments, particularly in relation to areas under development that are likely to fall within the scope of Article 2 in the future.

The research also identified that those in the third/women's sector who worked on Brexit struggled to keep abreast of developments, despite their best intent:

“And the real difficulty is that you can't (say) ... 'this is definitely going to happen',...[or] this gives the potential for rights to be rolled back,... the Dedicated Mechanism is obviously there. But ..... a lot of it is so technical, that .....I have to every time, check twice, that I actually understand...”. **Interview.**

### 5.3 Misunderstanding Section 75

As mentioned above, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 is aimed at ensuring that equality of opportunity and good relations are central to policy making and service delivery of public bodies. It is a free-standing duty on designated public bodies and is separate to rights that have come under EU equality law. However, upholding Section 75 is one means in which women's rights (and all S75 groups) are protected, and so is of relevance in relation to understanding the potential impact of Brexit. Yet, there was a perception that Section 75 was not being upheld. For example, as one interviewee summarised:

...it feels like policy is rolled out that doesn't take into account equality impacts or doesn't take into account the way that this affects ethnic minority communities and affects, you know, ethnic minority women or migrant women, and that has been a theme. Really, some of these issues are long-standing, and I would say that they have gotten worse... **Interview.**

In addition to this, the research identified misunderstandings of obligations under Section 75 amongst government officials, which further frustrate consultation where the nuances of what the Section 75 'due regard' duty actually means are not always fully understood. This has led to limited recognition that some issues impact women disproportionately to men (or vice versa), including Brexit, and therefore require gender specific policy solutions. As these responses from focus groups and interviews point to, this has resulted in a lack of trust in government officials to uphold equalities duties.

..it's the whole thing that when you speak to civil servants, about the kind of that idea of objective need and Section 75...so often I've heard that, well, you can't treat women and men differently, because that would be in contravention of Section 75. You know, you have to treat everybody [the same]. And, actually, that's not what equality means. **Focus Group.**

The response from a government official on the prospect of a Violence Against Women Strategy further demonstrates a lack of understanding of what gender equality actually means in practice, the official claimed "we can't do that, because what about men?" **Interview.**

It's almost like they didn't understand, they'll say... this will not impact adversely on men or women or you're like, well, we know that more women use transport so any decision you make is going to impact more on women. It's just that [they're].. not really grasp[ing] what that actually means. It's almost like well, we're not discriminating against anyone, everyone can use the service. Yeah, it's actually not even understanding who your target market is or who is using your services. **Interview.**

#### 5.4 Erosion of women's trust

Brexit has had a direct impact on [migrant] women here, [they're] afraid of coming forward because they're afraid of being deported through no fault of their own. **Focus Group.**

This focus group participant highlights how Brexit has contributed to a lack of trust in government in general by migrant women. However, our research demonstrates this is a wider phenomenon reflected amongst women more broadly in Northern Ireland.

Opinion polling conducted in Northern Ireland in October 2022 on the Protocol demonstrates the erosion of women's trust in the UK Government as compared to men (Figure 3). Specifically, a similar (and very small) proportion of women and men stated that they 'trusted' the UK Government with respect to the Protocol (6% and 7% respectively) and women were more trusting of the Irish Government, with respect to the Protocol, compared to men (52% and 39% respectively). In relation to the European Commission and European Union, women place more trust in them (55%) compared to men (40%), a difference also reflected in their levels of distrust. Both men and women reported high levels of distrust of the UK government with respect to the Protocol, with women marginally more distrustful than men (86% and 82% respectively). In respect to the Irish Government there was a clear gender difference with women showing significantly lower levels of distrust than men in respect to the Protocol (33% compared to 52%).

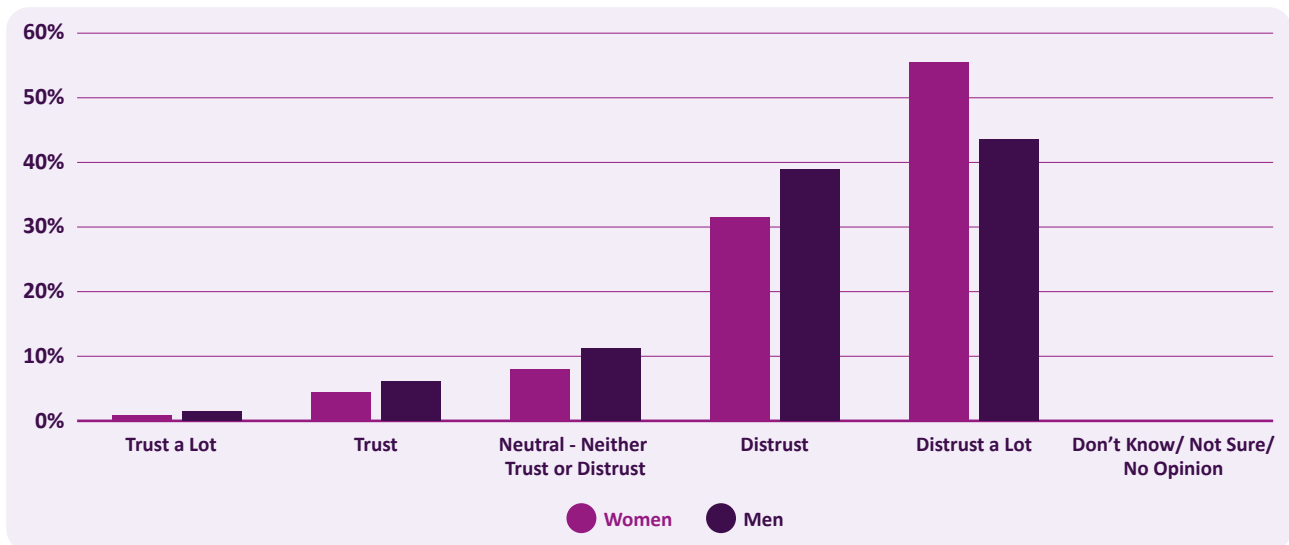
# The Impact of Brexit on Women

IN NORTHERN IRELAND

It is also worth noting that with the exception of the UK Government, women were also more likely to be neutral and neither trust nor distrust the NI Executive, Irish Government and the European Commission/European Union compared to men (Figures 3-6).

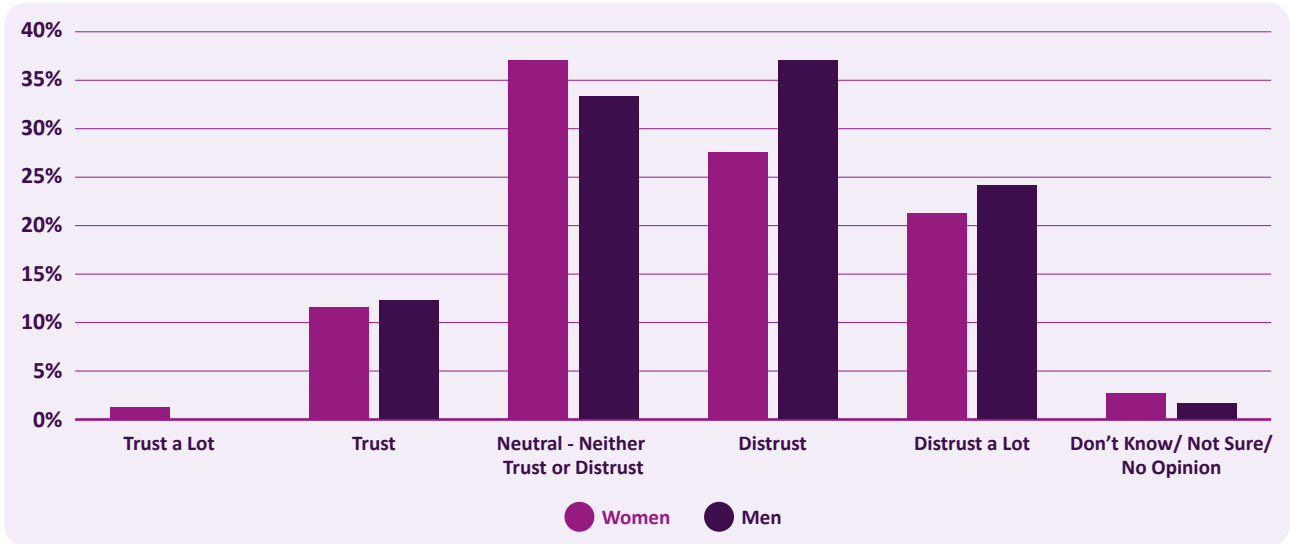
Overall, the emergence of a clear gender division between men and women in terms of trust in the key players in Northern Ireland in respect to Brexit, also reflects the gendered pattern emerging in relation to opinion on Brexit and the Protocol (see Figures 1 and 2 in Chapter 1 above). Another factor that may contribute to high levels of distrust amongst women could be the information vacuum, which as this chapter has shown, has impacted women in particular ways.

**Figure 3 Trust/Distrust in the UK Government with respect to the Protocol**



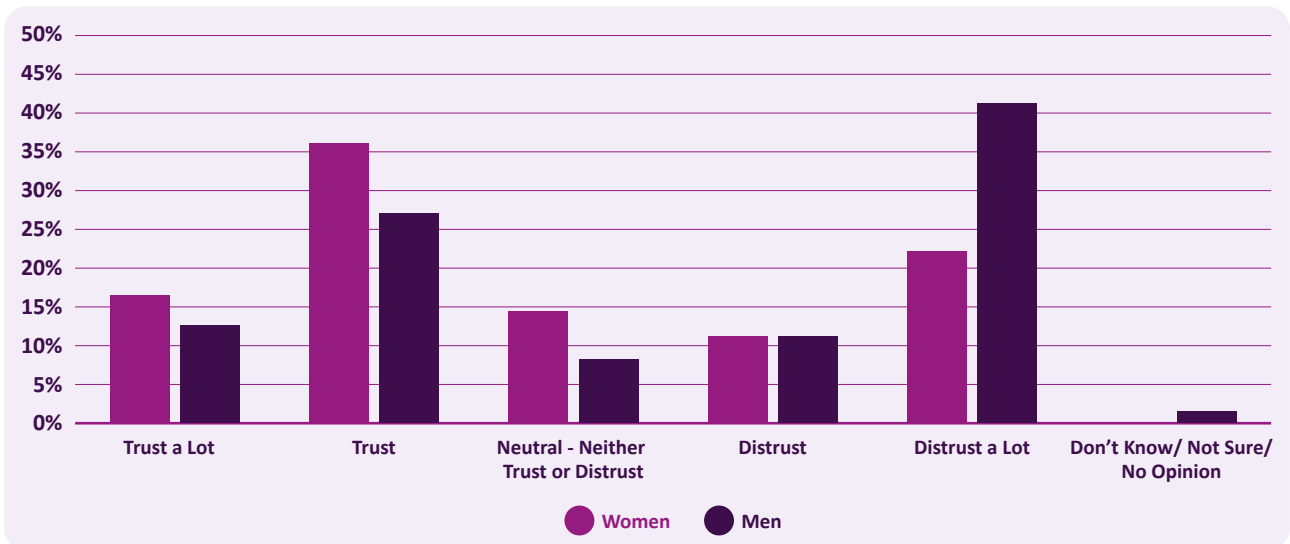
Source: ESRC-funded 'a place between': the Multilevel Dynamics of Implementing the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

**Figure 4 Trust/Distrust in the NI Executive with respect to the Protocol**



Source: ESRC-funded 'a place between': the Multilevel Dynamics of Implementing the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

**Figure 5 Trust/Distrust in the Irish Government with respect to the Protocol**

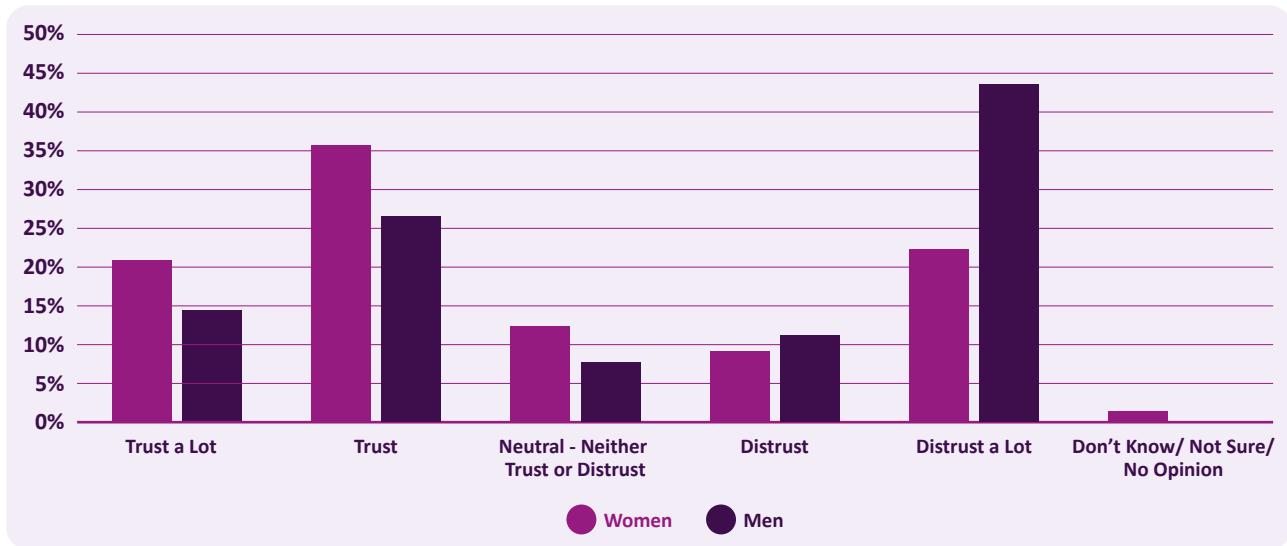


Source: ESRC-funded 'a place between': the Multilevel Dynamics of Implementing the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

# The Impact of Brexit on Women

IN NORTHERN IRELAND

**Figure 6 Trust/Distrust in the European Commission/European Union with respect to the Protocol 4**



Source: ESRC-funded 'a place between': the Multilevel Dynamics of Implementing the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

## 5.5 Summary and recommendations

### Summary

The legal framework for exploring 'the actual, perceived and potential socioeconomic impacts of the UK's withdrawal from the EU on women in Northern Ireland' lies within Protocol (Windsor Framework) Article 2, which sets out the UK Government's commitments on equality and human rights post Brexit. In so doing it sustains the importance of equality and human rights commitments as set out in the GFA. Article 2 states that there will be no diminution of rights, safeguards or equality of opportunity as set out in Chapter Six of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement as a result of Brexit. In addition, Annex 1 of the Protocol (Windsor Framework) sets out six areas of EU law where 'dynamic alignment' is to be maintained, meaning that law in Northern Ireland must reflect changes to the six listed equality Directives.

Brexit has been a process closely associated with misinformation, perceived by some women to come from a range of sources, including government officials.

Evidence from women we spoke to has indicated that the lack of official information on how Brexit impacts day-to-day life in Northern Ireland has made it difficult for many of these women to navigate issues affecting their lives. This has been made all the more challenging by some officials misapplying the law, potentially due to



a lack of understanding of the legal implications of Brexit for different cohorts of people, which has been reported in previous research, as well as by participants in this research.<sup>120</sup>

As a result, certain groups of women, including migrant women, are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by gatekeepers<sup>121</sup> within some migrant and minority ethnic communities<sup>122</sup>.

The complex and highly technical nature of Brexit has added to the information vacuum, including the ability of the third sector/women's sector to keep up with and understand, the impact of Brexit on women.

Misunderstandings of Section 75 by government officials (including in NI) has resulted in concerns being raised that issues that impact women disproportionately compared to men (or vice versa), including Brexit, are not being addressed by gender specific solutions, and this has resulted in a lack of trust in government officials upholding their equality duties.

The gendered impact of the information vacuum may have contributed to a lack of trust in relation to the implementation of the Protocol by women as compared to men, directed at key drivers of Brexit, namely the UK Government.

## Recommendations

- f) **Provide accessible information on the impact of Brexit on everyday life in Northern Ireland.** The UK Government and NI Executive should more effectively communicate with citizens in Northern Ireland about the impact of Brexit and the Protocol/Windsor Framework on their day-to-day lives, what is changing; what is remaining the same; and how they may find out more information, particularly in relation to their rights and entitlements, including cross border issues. This should include specific information relating to the women, including minority ethnic women, rural women, disabled women and other women with multiple identities.

120 Pivotal (2023) Impact of Brexit on Minority Ethnic and Migrant People in Northern Ireland. ECNI

121 Gatekeepers are understood as individuals with the power to control access to resources.

122 Froelich, D.E., Rehm, M. and Rienties, B.C. (eds) Mixed Methods Social Network Analysis; Theories and Methodologies in Learning and Education. Routledge; McAreavey, R. and Das, C. (2013) [A delicate balancing act: Negotiating with gatekeepers for ethical research when researching minority communities](#). International Journal of Qualitative Methods. Volume 12 pp. 113-131

## Recommendations

- g) **Create an information portal on Brexit.** Linked to the above recommendation, The NI Executive and relevant NI Departments should create an online information portal that sets out key Brexit related information. It should include a FAQ section and be regularly updated. It should be accessible in different languages to support minority ethnic and migrant women and accessible in different formats for disabled women. Information included in this portal should set out specific information relating to the rights and entitlements of women post Brexit. Steps should be taken to raise awareness of this online portal with women in NI, including rural women, minoritized ethnic women and other women with multiple identities. This should include engaging the women's sector.
- h) **Ensure UK and NI Executive officials have up-to date information on Article 2.** The UK Government, NI Executive and relevant NI Departments should provide guidance for relevant staff on Article 2, in addition to regular and effective training. They should also act to ensure UK and NI Executive policy guidance includes reference to Article 2.
- i) **Ensure base-line knowledge of Section 75 amongst relevant Government officials.** UK and NI Departments, and other public bodies, who are subject to the Section 75 duties, should take additional steps to ensure the effective implementation of these duties, including in the context of the development/implementation of Brexit related policies, for example, through the effective training of officials on their obligations under Section 75.

## 6. Protection for Women's Rights Post-Brexit

---

The legal context of Brexit is highly complex and has generated a lot of confusion not only among residents in Northern Ireland but more widely within business, amongst third sector organisations and within government.

...first thing I would be able to say is that Brexit has made life more difficult, not just for me... **Focus Group.**

In this chapter we explore the emerging implications for women's lived experiences. A number of key themes emerge from the data including the confusion arising from the NI Protocol; the challenges in accessing health services, especially maternity and abortion services; and the fear of erosion of rights more generally. Before we delve into these themes, we set out below important legal context on Brexit including the non-diminution of rights and dynamic alignment. (See [Legal context for Brexit in Northern Ireland](#) where we provide more information on the legal complexities arising from Brexit). We then draw on our empirical data to further develop these themes.

### 6.1 Brexit, the Protocol and the Windsor Framework: political distrust

Our research demonstrates an association between fear of removal of rights and lack of trust in government and politics. In one focus group there was a discussion about the lack of trust in government and the potential for erosion of rights post Brexit. The following quote illustrates:

I cannot trust Westminster to protect our rights at all....Yes, we got abortion rights and we got equal marriage through Westminster, and an Irish language Act. But that was only because of human rights standards in the case of abortion... we were making them look bad... look at the amount of legislation they just cut off the statute books the other night with the retained EU law bill. Nobody knows what the hell's going to happen with maternity leave, holiday leave, workers' rights. **Focus Group.**

The politics around the implementation of the NI Protocol have been particularly intense at times, particularly in Northern Ireland with implications for individuals and families in their everyday lives. Circumstances have been highly fluid and uncertain which has impacted on women's perception of what Brexit means for them. This includes a growing lack of trust in politicians and a sense that gender

equality in Northern Ireland is not a priority for, or of particular interest to, the UK Government. For instance, in the autumn of 2022 the UK Government progressed a NI Protocol Bill which sought to disapply parts of the Protocol, and in the process handed substantial power to Ministers to act without full Parliamentary scrutiny.<sup>123</sup> Had that Bill been implemented it would have meant the UK Government would not meet its international obligations as set out in the Withdrawal Agreement and the Protocol. Although the government has since committed to drop the Bill in light of the Windsor Framework, women described how the politics around proposing to not meet international obligations has reduced their trust in the UK Government (see chapter 5 for more details). There was a sense among some women that we spoke with that this demonstrated a lack of interest in wider issues of gender equality in Northern Ireland.

I think Brexit has caused a huge distraction in our politics and it has meant that everyone's so concerned about Brexit and have been since the referendum, that we're not getting progress on rights. And that might not seem like a direct impact but the fact that, you know, those resources are getting used up talking about Brexit means that they're not talking about things like gender equality, or, you know, all these other issues that we need to see progress on. You know, if you're collapsing the [NI] Executive, over the Protocol, the impact that that's had on our ability to make progress on gender equality and other human rights.

### **Focus Group.**

The Windsor Framework reforms the NI Protocol and was agreed between the EU and the UK on 27 February 2023. Some of the reforms relate to goods crossing the Irish Sea from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and were aimed at easing EU rules and regulations to achieve freer flow of goods and services from Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK. However, Article 2 of the Protocol largely remains unchanged in the context of the adjustments made to other parts of the NI Protocol as set out in the Windsor Framework.<sup>124</sup>

---

123 Hayward, K., (2022) [Northern Ireland Protocol Bill – not enough and far too much?](#) UK in a Changing Europe

124 Though it is important to note that the ECNI and NIHRC has highlighted a number of concerns in relation to the potential outworking of the Windsor Framework on rights within the scope of Article 2. See ECNI and NIHRC (2023) [Submission of the NIHRC and ECNI to the House of Lords Sub-Committee on the Protocol's call for evidence for its inquiry on the Windsor Framework](#). Equality Commission for NI and NI Human Rights Commission.

## 6.2 Protections of rights post-Brexit

The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement sets out the details of citizens' rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity. The UK Government committed in the Protocol to ensuring that certain equality and human rights in Northern Ireland in the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement would not be reduced by Brexit.<sup>125</sup> In addition, it has committed to ensuring dynamic alignment between the law of Northern Ireland and any changes to EU equality law across six different Directives, as outlined in Annex 1 of the Protocol (including the four Gender Equality Directives, the Race Equality Directive and Employment [Framework] Directive).

In line with these commitments, the NI Act has been amended to ensure that NI Ministers, Departments and Assembly cannot legislate in a way that reduces these rights. In addition to the six Directives identified in Annex 1, other relevant EU law that underpins rights set out in the relevant chapter of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement include, but are not limited to, the Victims' Directive; the Parental Leave Directive; and the Pregnant Workers' Directive.<sup>126</sup> The Dedicated Mechanism of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission have an oversight role in relation to this commitment.<sup>127</sup> Thus, as Craig et al.<sup>128</sup> state, this 'represents a reaffirmation of commitment to the 1998 provisions, while simultaneously demanding clarity in the relationship between domestic and European Union law, and obligating an ongoing monitoring process of this post-Brexit'. They go on to explain that non-diminution does apply to EU law beyond the six equality directives but does not track updates or amendments to relevant EU law post-Brexit.

The dynamic alignment obligation is designed to ensure that certain Northern Ireland equality laws will not fall behind minimum EU standards of protection in anti-discrimination. The legal context for citizens' rights, including gender equality, is therefore complex and evolving. Part of the challenge of implementing such an aspiration is the lack of legal clarity, that is, knowing and understanding the implications of emerging law. It is not yet fully clear what constitutes a potential breach of Article 2 of the Protocol, such as in relation to the right to health.<sup>129</sup>

---

125 Equality Commission of Northern Ireland (Accessed June 2023) [Protecting rights after Brexit](#)

126 Craig, S., Deb, A., Frantziou, E., Horne, A., Murray, C., Rice, C., Rooney, J., (2022) [European Union Developments in Equality and Human Rights: The Impact of Brexit on the Divergence of Rights and Best Practice on the Island of Ireland](#), Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission

127 UK Government (2020) [Explainer: UK Government commitment to no diminution of rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity in Northern Ireland](#), UK government website

128 Craig, S., Deb, A., Frantziou, E., Horne, A., Murray, C., Rice, C., Rooney, J., (2022) [European Union Developments in Equality and Human Rights: The Impact of Brexit on the Divergence of Rights and Best Practice on the Island of Ireland](#), Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, page 4.

129 Hervey, T., (2022) [Brexit, Health and its potential impact on Article 2 of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol](#), Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

Legal scholars argue that certainty is likely only to emerge through interpretation of laws in this area, with courts being drawn into defining the boundaries of the commitment to non-diminution<sup>130</sup> and has been improved by the setting out of a test for establishing a breach of Article 2 of the Protocol by the High Court in February 2022<sup>131</sup> and NI Court of Appeal in May 2023,<sup>132</sup> in its decision in relation to a challenge to the NI abortion regulations.

The UK Government therefore retains some obligations to maintain the standards of EU equality law in Northern Ireland. However, citizens of GB and NI have lost the decisive feature of EU anti-discrimination law - directly effective EU equality rights, which they could initiate enforcement of, potentially through the Court of Justice of the EU, if necessary. This is in addition to losing EU Commission oversight over the UK's activities via infringement procedures, if necessary, before that very same court.<sup>133</sup>

### Divergence of rights: EU developments

Research has highlighted that there is the potential for equality and human rights, including rights relating to women, to diverge on the island of Ireland as a result of changes to EU law that have already taken place post Brexit, or due to potential future EU laws. These include rights relating to gender pay transparency measures, work life balance and gender balance on non-executive director roles.<sup>134</sup> Further, there is a proposed EU Directive on combatting violence against women and domestic violence.<sup>135</sup> This Directive, if implemented, would strengthen rights for women, including disabled women.

The NI Assembly, as a matter of best practice, can choose to voluntarily align with these EU developments, even if not required to do so under Article 2 of the Protocol. The NI Assembly would have been required to implement these EU laws into NI law, if adopted by the EU, had the UK not left the EU. Voluntarily aligning with these EU developments will help to significantly strengthen rights for women in Northern Ireland, including disabled women, and women subjected to violence, and help avoid a divergence of women's rights on the island of Ireland.

---

130 Craig, S., Deb, A., Frantziou, E., Horne, A., Murray, C., Rice, C., Rooney, J., (2022) [European Union Developments in Equality and Human Rights: The Impact of Brexit on the Divergence of Rights and Best Practice on the Island of Ireland](#), Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission

131 Re [SPUC Pro-Life Limited \[2022\] NIQB 9](#)

132 [Summary of judgment in re: SPUC \(CA\)](#), 25 May 2023

133 Schiek, Dagmar G. and Fanning, Aislinn, Equality Law After 'Brexit' – Stunted or Reverse 'Repatriation'? (July 31, 2021). Research Handbook on Legal Aspects of Brexit. Adam Lazowski & Adam Cygan (editors), Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, forthcoming.

134 S Craig, A Deb, E Frantziou, A Horne, C Murray, C Rice and J Rooney, [European Union developments in Equality and Human Rights: The Impact of Brexit on the divergence of rights and best practice on the island of Ireland](#), (ECNI, 2022)

135 [Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combatting violence against women and domestic violence](#). European Commission

This is particularly important in the context that women’s equality rights in Northern Ireland prior to Brexit, had already fallen behind the rights of women in other parts of the UK. For example, unlike in Great Britain, there is no protection for women against sex discrimination or harassment by public bodies in the exercise of their public functions, or by schools as regards their treatment of trans pupils.<sup>136</sup> Further, in the area of gender pay transparency obligations on employers, Northern Ireland has failed to reflect developments in Great Britain and Ireland.<sup>137</sup>

### Confusion: a complex legal context

Due to the commitments enshrined in the Brexit arrangements, many relevant EU laws remain relevant to women’s rights in Northern Ireland.<sup>138</sup> Despite the assertion that rights will be retained, a common theme recurring in many of our conversations was the perception by women of a clear reduction in basic human rights and, as we go on to explore, women’s rights relating to accessing healthcare, particularly reproductive services (maternity and abortion). Some of the focus group participants were aware that existing EU laws underpinned their current rights to maternity leave and flexibility in work. Many women expressed concern about the lack of clarity around those rights following Brexit and also fear about how those rights may be eroded in the future.

I think it’s important to view Brexit within the wider agenda...that’s been happening, the roll-back of rights over the last decade or so. Like this is part, this is just another part of that plan. You know, we’re seeing the repeal of the Human Rights Act, by whatever they’re calling it the [UK] ‘Bill of Rights’<sup>139</sup> which is a rights removal bill. And Brexit is just another part of that, because what they didn’t like about the EU was this accountability, they didn’t want to be accountable, because they knew that they wanted to roll back on all these rights and the EU wouldn’t let them. So it’s part of this wider plan to take away rights from people. And that’s why, like, I see Brexit as a human rights issue, because I know that it’s not just the rights we’re going to lose as a result of just leaving the EU. It’s about all the other things that are going to come down the line, if this agenda continues...**Focus Group.**

---

136 [Equality Commission for Northern Ireland: Gender law reform](#)

137 S Craig, A Deb, E Frantziou, A Horne, C Murray, C Rice and J Rooney, [European Union developments in Equality and Human Rights: The Impact of Brexit on the divergence of rights and best practice on the island of Ireland](#), (ECNI, 2022)

138 Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2023) [NIHRC / ECNI Briefing on the Retained EU Law \(Revocation and Reform\) Bill](#), Equality Commission for Northern Ireland website

139 Though we note here the Bill of Rights has since been abandoned by the UK Government, The NI Bill of Rights is distinct and separate to the UKG proposed Bill of Rights; according to CAJ, the purpose of which is to diminish incorporation of the ECHR in domestic law across the UK. Committee on the Administration of Justice, (2023), [72 Pre-Sessional Working Group \(PSWG\), 6-10 March 2023, List of Issues \(LoI\) for the United Kingdom Regarding issues relating to the Northern Ireland peace agreements, Committee on the Administration of Justice website.](#)

This woman went on to talk more about how the Brexit vote itself was a gendered project, before voicing concerns over whether or not maternity rights and equal pay would be guaranteed in the future. This was a widespread concern raised by many women we spoke to. Confusion as well as frustration was evident in nearly every conversation we had with women in focus groups and interviews. The lack of clarity arising from what was at times a politically chaotic post-Brexit period did not help with the confusion and the sense that other issues were not being addressed – relating to healthcare and wider services:

...it's hard to know what you're losing as a consequence of things that aren't happening. And I think at the minute the political stagnation, and we don't have institutions...**Expert Seminar.**

The complex legal backdrop, including commitments to 'dynamic alignment' or 'non-diminution' are difficult to operationalise in an everyday context; as yet it remains unclear what the approach of the UK Government will be in practice to ensure compliance, it will be managed through domestic law and the work of the Dedicated Mechanism (DM).

...getting to grips with what no diminution means, getting to grips with what keeping pace means, getting to grips with the interpretation of what [it] means in practice, it's just so complicated. **Interview.**

## Lack of NI Bill of Rights

Further concerns have been raised by ECNI and NIHRC that a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland remains an unfulfilled commitment of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, and that Article 2 of the Protocol is limited in scope and no substitute for a NI Bill of Rights.<sup>140</sup>

In its report on a NI Bill of Rights in February 2022, the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights, which was established under the New Decade New Approach deal to progress this work, noted that "Many stakeholders and witnesses suggested that withdrawal from the EU strengthens the case for a bill of rights, and that a bill of rights may help to minimise divergence in rights". Critically, a NI Bill of Rights has the potential to strengthen rights for women in Northern Ireland. Findings of the Committee's survey suggest high levels of support for a Bill of Rights among women (88%).

---

140 See NI Human Rights Commission, '[Response to the Consultation on Human Rights Act Reform: A Modern Bill of Rights](#)' (NIHRC, 2022). Para 3.29 and Equality Commission for NI [Submission to Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights for NI](#) ([equalityni.org](#)) Section 5



However, there have been no further developments on a NI Bill of Rights since this report,<sup>141</sup> particularly in the absence of a NI Assembly.<sup>142</sup>

### 6.3 Spotlight on: Access to reproductive health services (maternity and abortion)

Elsewhere it has been pointed out that access to health is a key human right and as such is covered by Article 2 in terms of ‘rights, safeguards or equality of opportunity’ protections.<sup>143</sup> Moreover the loss of EU law underpinning access to healthcare could be argued to be a diminishment in itself.<sup>144</sup> When we delve into the substance of individuals’ access to healthcare, there is evidence from other research of a potential diminution of rights for EU-26 frontier workers<sup>145</sup>, a matter clearly articulated by Hervey:

‘...the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement obliges the UK to secure continued access to healthcare services in either Ireland or Northern Ireland, the way that the UK has hitherto implemented this obligation excludes family members who are not resident in Northern Ireland. NHS infrastructure (for example, concerning access to vaccination, and the paperwork showing vaccination status) is ill-adapted to the rights of frontier workers. These gaps constitute a potential breach of Article 2 I/NI Protocol’ (p. 5).

But as one of our informants above explained, even legal scholars are not always clear on rights to health. This lack of clarity permeates to front line workers who operate by implementing their organisation’s interpretation of the Protocol. Thus, legal confusion over rights from service providers arising from different entitlements associated with immigration status means that people are being denied access to entitlements, such as free healthcare. Applicants to the EU settlement scheme fall into an uncertain legal area, with much more substantive rights limitations. In theory, anyone with settled status under the EUSS would be in a materially different position to an asylum seeker; specifically their health care access rights are equivalent to UK citizen rights in areas covered by the Withdrawal Agreement. However, there is an issue related to providing proof of status, and a misunderstanding amongst Health Trusts on their EUSS status as one of the focus groups respondents eloquently explains:

---

141 Northern Ireland Assembly (2022) [Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights](#).

142 ECNI and NIHRC (2023) Annual Report of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission on the Implementation of Article 2 of the Windsor Framework 2022-2023. Paras 4.3 and 4.4.

143 Hervey, T., (2022) [Brexit, Health and its potential impact on Article 2 of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol](#), Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

144 Ibid.

145 Ibid.

In Northern Ireland asylum seekers can access health care through the NHS free of charge up to the point of a refused appeal decision... There is a grey area within this legislation because it predates Brexit. It hasn't really been defined where applicants to the EU settlement scheme fall. Within this it's more like interpretation, based on what the Health Trusts are coming out with, but it's not codified in legislation....it affects people who are exempt, and who aren't exempt. They are still being charged because the actions of the Health Trust seems in many cases to charge by default, like almost like an assumption that because this person has an immigration status...they are liable to be charged.

### **Focus Group.**

Proving residency is gendered and advocacy organisations explain how it is more likely to impact on women, young people and older people as we go on to discuss below. However, this was not recognised by the health sector:

...when we brought this to the heads of primary care within the Department of Health. We were basically told, well, that policy that you have to provide [proof of residency] that's to do with the border and...it wasn't intended to be discriminatory. **Interview.**

The research undertaken by Hervey<sup>146</sup> reminds us 'respect for the right to health means non-discriminatory access to health services' and it obliges governments to 'continually improve the health rights of their populations'. Our research participant elaborates on the gender dimension explaining how many cases that have been dealt with by their advocacy organisation are related to women's health:

... where somebody was exempt, but was still charged, where they gave birth...most of the time when we're seeing this, it's related to maternity care or women's health care. So the NHS has a list of all of the services that are chargeable if you are not exempt under that jurisdiction's legislation around this. Any maternity care, any women's health care is on that list, so, no matter what way you cut it's going to be chargeable if you're not exempt... it's a very gendered xenophobic and misogynistic discourse that is kind of manifesting in policy... nearly every case we've seen where this has come across has been somehow related to maternity or women's health. **Interview.**

She went on to explain how advisors working for advocacy organisations can fight for months to get charges dropped because Health Trusts refuse to accept proof of status. Constructing an argument to make a case is highly complex and time consuming for all parties involved, as is dealing with a case.

---

146 Ibid.

... we actually had to go to the EU law clinic at York University and basically ask them to give an argument on terms of interpretation of EU law. **Interview.**

The lack of clarity around rights post Brexit and the process of developing an argument to challenge decisions on access to healthcare has emotional and resource implications for the individuals, health bodies and advocacy organisations. It has the potential to bring service providers into the advocacy space if health workers are trying to support their service users and is indicative of the potentially disproportionate impact of Brexit on women. The lack of clarity of rights was visceral and felt by many of the women we spoke to:

...it is open to interpretation, anyway, because you could argue it's impossible not to have some diminution of rights with Brexit...the diminution of rights is very hard to just get your finger on...rights and standards are all being kind of pushed in almost conflicting directions by trying to reconcile you know all of these different policy frameworks and legislation. **Interview.**

Women talked about the differential abortion services between the Republic of Ireland and those available in the UK. There was a perception that the options for women in Northern Ireland were already poor, particularly when compared with the Republic of Ireland, though the exact impact of Brexit on accessing abortion services, including in the Republic of Ireland, was uncertain and not clear. On top of this, there was a perception that the disparity in access to abortion between the north and south could be an issue in respect to no diminution of rights. As this expert explains:

I think Article 2 is interesting there, because if we're talking about a disparity of rights, in the south it's on request up to 12 weeks. They have telemedicine, we don't have telemedicine. **Expert Seminar.**

It is impossible to disentangle the myriad issues influencing the outcomes of Brexit for women's everyday lives. In addition, there is a temporal dimension as the issues are fluid and unfolding.

### **Fear of erosion of rights**

The attrition of rights extended beyond health services and into the workplace. Our interviews and focus groups revealed genuine fear among women about how and if protection of rights would be upheld - how the law would be interpreted, and how women's rights would evolve and thus be safeguarded in the context of Brexit. This is further elucidated below:

But regarding employment of women. I do think, with being part of the EU, it brought to focus many laws to do with human rights...a lot of those issues concerning women came from the EU...That to me is extremely positive, and certainly with Brexit we are told that we will still be under EU for many aspects. That to me is good....[but]...unless the laws are extremely rigorous, the role of women, the rights, the opportunities, may not be as protected as they were before, but we have been told that they will be. **Focus Group.**

Women are still afraid to speak up and stand up for themselves. Especially in the workplace, because they mightn't be on a contract, they might be on a zero [hours contract], you know, they could be asked at any time to leave. **Focus Group.**

Previous research has shown how women are more likely to be on zero-hours contracts than men<sup>147</sup>. Those positions are already vulnerable and this has been exacerbated because of the fear of what might happen in the future. Women we spoke to were evidently fearful of the potential erosion of women's rights in the workplace due to the perception that Brexit had removed protections; which according to them, the EU had been successful in upholding.

## 6.4 Summary and recommendations

### Summary

The distinctiveness of the Northern Ireland post-conflict and geographical context is evident in our findings. A complicated legal infrastructure has been implemented to uphold the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, ensuring that certain equality and human rights of citizens would continue to be protected. Particularly prevalent is the fear about the potential erosion of women's rights (relating especially to gender equality in the workplace and healthcare, including reproductive rights).

The NI Assembly, as a matter of best practice, can choose to voluntarily align with EU developments, even if not required to do so under Article 2 of the Protocol. These include rights relating to gender pay transparency measures, work life balance and gender balance on non-executive director roles. Further, there is a proposed EU Directive on combatting violence against women and domestic violence. Voluntarily aligning with these EU developments will help to significantly strengthen rights for women in Northern Ireland.

---

147 Office of National Statistics, (2023), [EMP17 People in Employment in Zero Hours Contracts](#), ONS website

The complex and convoluted context for upholding rights for women in Northern Ireland has created confusion, frustration, and an evident sense by women of being side-lined by politicians. The way in which Brexit and debate surrounding the Protocol/Windsor Framework have dominated the political landscape has detracted from progressing important policies that affect women's everyday lives.

The disproportionate impact on women of the changing health policy context as a result of Brexit has meant that women with different types of immigration status, who are eligible for healthcare, do not have guaranteed access to that care.

The political discourse and divisions that were manifest around Brexit, including the political stagnation in Northern Ireland, has resulted in a lack of trust by women in politicians, along with a sense that progression of important gender policy areas have been neglected.

## Recommendations

- j) **Ensure clarity and signposting on rights.** The UK Government, NI Executive and relevant NI Departments should provide greater clarity on women's rights post Brexit and ensure signposting to equality and human rights organisations, including the Dedicated Mechanism, in its communications on Brexit.
- k) **Ensure no reduction of women's rights and compliance with Article 2 is included in policy and processes from the outset.** The UK Government and NI Executive should ensure there is no reduction in women's rights in Northern Ireland as a result of Brexit, including ensuring compliance with Article 2 obligations. It should also ensure consideration of the extent to which any change to legislation or policy engages Article 2 from the outset.
- l) **Ensure Explanatory Memoranda / Human Rights Memoranda detail consideration of Article 2 conformity.** Aligned to the recommendation above, the UK Government and NI Executive should ensure that where Explanatory Memoranda / Human Rights Memoranda of draft legislation are likely to engage Article 2, that they detail what consideration has been given to ensure conformity.

## Recommendations

- m) **Deliver on the New Decade New Approach commitment.** The NI Executive and UK Government should deliver on the New Decade New Approach commitment to progress the NI Bill of Rights through a dedicated NI Bill of Rights Committee, that strengthens rights for women in Northern Ireland and which employs a gender sensitive approach mindful of 1325/Women, Peace and Security.
- n) **Commission research into non-diminution relating to Article 2.** ECNI and/or NIHRC should consider commissioning additional research into non-diminution related to Article 2/impact of Brexit, including in areas, such as access by women to health services (including but not limited to the experiences of migrant women, and maternity services) and immigration status/citizenship.
- o) **Ensure all eligible women can access healthcare.** The UK Government, the NI Executive, NI Departments, including the Department for Health, and NI Health Trusts, should take effective steps to address barriers to women, including minority ethnic women and/or women seeking asylum, to accessing public services, particularly health care services, post Brexit. For example, but not limited to, providing information and training to front line health workers.
- p) **Align with future EU legislation on women's rights.** The UK Government, NI Executive and NI Departments should voluntarily align with future EU legislation which strengthens women's rights, including equality and Human Rights impacting women, even if not required under Article 2 to mitigate the impact of Brexit on women. For example, but not limited to, binding pay transparency measures, minimum rights for victims of violence against women and, gender balance on corporate boards.

## 7. The Social and Economic Impact of Brexit on Women

---

Teasing out the socio-economic implications of Brexit for women in Northern Ireland is challenging, not least because it is relatively early in the process and remains difficult to pinpoint cause and effect, but it is also difficult to understand what opportunities have been lost due to political stagnation. What we found in our research was a genuine fear about what will or will not happen in the future, including the nature of future policies to support and generate jobs and support the labour market; the perceived loss of employment opportunities due to peripherality, this having implications for family units, including emigration of the younger generations; and ramifications of cross border dynamics, including differential economies and employment prospects; and a loss of diversity more generally in the population. Accordingly, in this chapter we explore these themes, drawing from the literature and the qualitative data. Before we highlight important features of the economy in Northern Ireland and further explore socio-economic implications of Brexit on women, it's worth noting the immediate issue facing many women. The cost-of-living crisis was frequently mentioned and has knock-on implications for families:

Then for women, as for me...the heating of the house has gone up so badly. And it still comes down to the same income... So you can't afford to do the things you do with your children, the way you were doing it before. **Focus Group.**

Economically, Northern Ireland is more vulnerable to the implications of Brexit than other parts of the UK due to its changing trade arrangements and sharing of a land border with Ireland, an EU Member State, a matter that has been addressed to an extent through the Windsor Framework. Its economy is highly integrated into the wider UK economy, being exceptionally concentrated on its neighbouring markets.<sup>148</sup> The NI Economic Trade Statistics measures sales and purchases of goods and services in the non-financial business sector. The most recent report (December 2022)<sup>149</sup> shows that sales increased to the largest amount on record from £67.8 billion in 2020 to £77.1 billion in 2021. Ireland is the largest export markedly higher than the rest of the EU combined at £5.2 billion. In addition, the value of exports to other EU countries and the rest of the world increased during this time. The purchases of goods and services from Great Britain account for just under 30%, while those from Ireland make up 6.3%. Overall, Northern Ireland purchases more than it trades from Great Britain and the reverse is true for the Republic of Ireland.

---

148 Lawless, M., (2019), [Firms and Trade on the Island of Ireland](#), Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland  
149 [Northern Ireland Economic Trade Statistics bulletin for 2021](#). NISRA

## 7.1 Communities, families and social support

The ruptures and impacts on family lives and on communities more generally was notable in our research. Fundamentally, women involved with community organisations felt a loss of vibrancy and diversity, with many EU nationals previously living in Northern Ireland choosing to return to the EU as a result of Brexit:

For immigrants like us that are settling in, there are a lot of lovely people that we don't see in the community where we go to activity. And those are people that energise you, people that motivate you, they're not there... **Focus Group.**

It is impossible to isolate women from the family unit as previous research has shown how the family is best understood as a set of interrelated components.<sup>150</sup> It follows that understanding one subsystem in the family, for example, the role of women, is incomplete without appreciation of the wider system, that is, the family, this having implications for women – their wellbeing and quality of life. The opportunities for their children were considered to have been diminished following Brexit which is perceived to have impact community cohesion and result in the prevalence of misinformation. As this participant in our expert seminar noted:

But I suppose core to that is most of our members are really concerned about the impact on community cohesion, the lack of transparency and clarity about where all of this is going, the misinformation and disinformation that gets forayed around communities in those gaps that our governments don't deliver on. And I think ... women's voices have not been asked for...**Expert Seminar.**

Perhaps an overlooked indirect impact of Brexit is in regard to the impact on the role that many women have in organising food in the family unit which has been impacted by the cost-of-living crisis and is intertwined with Brexit. This was particularly relevant in the weeks and months following the end of the Brexit transition period and preceding the cost-of-living crisis, when trade issues resulted in many empty shelves in supermarkets and corresponding upward pressure on prices:<sup>151</sup>

I think Brexit has increased the poverty level, because I also work in the foodbank, and the pressure is really, really outrageous. **Focus Group.**

... the women are the managers, especially their own homes, we are the ones that is facing the heat of: I go to the supermarket today, I spent £10, and I came home with a bag... generally, the costs affects the women more. **Focus Group.**

150 Cox MJ, Paley B. (1997) Families as systems. *The Annual Review of Psychology*. 48:243–267.

151 Bogle, D. and D. Jordan (2021) [Why are supermarket shelves in Northern Ireland Empty](#). Economics Observatory



The wider context for this has been the austerity agenda, an explicit UK government policy from 2010 to reduce public expenditure. It was accompanied by financial liberalisation and deregulation of the labour market and concerns have been raised that it has left a large shadow over the delivery of public services across the UK including education, health (public, physical and mental) and social care.<sup>152</sup> This has included a reduction in the real value of unemployment benefits.<sup>153</sup>

Women we spoke to talked about their fears that welfare support structures would be further reduced because of Brexit. Such reductions would have the potential to disproportionately affect women. Figures from the Department of Communities show that, as of November 2018, around three quarters (74.2%) of a total of 31,080 income support claimants were women.<sup>154</sup> Most woman who were income support claimants were likely to be lone parents. Two thirds of women claimants (64.3%) were lone parents, whereas only 4.7% of male claimants were lone parents. Lone parents have become particularly vulnerable due to the combined effects of the Covid pandemic, austerity context, and Brexit. For example, as this woman explains the issues facing some young mothers in the private rented sector:

And do you know who they're targeting? Young mothers...Young mothers. I have listened to five different cases, maybe in the last six months about them being targeted, increase of rent. Notice to quit. Do you know, not by the law, not going through the laws and I know the legislation...and one girl has said, 'I don't want to annoy my landlord'. He wouldn't fix her heating. He increased her rent. **Focus Group.**

This is an example of the intersection of different issues including reduced public spending; Brexit and the cost-of-living crisis.

The intersection of migration, Brexit and women's rights was manifest among migrant women experiencing domestic violence who were often unaware of their rights, due to the complicated legal circumstances.

...domestic abuse is a ground for making a late EUSS application. Currently, there's no guidance on how long people can make late applications... Domestic abuse is one of those grounds. And we have seen, at [our service], why this is so important, and why this would be given as a ground. **Expert Seminar.**

---

152 Toynbee, P., Walker, D., 2020. The lost decade 2010-2020 and what lies ahead for Britain. Guardian Faber Publishing.

153 Dagdeviren, H., Donoghue, M. and Wearmouth, A. 2018. When rhetoric does not translate to reality: Hardship, empowerment and the third sector in austerity localism. *The Sociological Review* 1–18.

154 Note that Income Support is an old style of support which has been replaced gradually since 2018 with Universal Credit. This has meant that after 2018 there are no new claims for Income Support. Note also that UC statistics do not provide a breakdown for gender of applicant and so the figures for 2018 are the last year in which new claims for support were able to be disaggregated by gender.

She explained how some women had been told by their partners that they didn't need to apply to secure their migration status within the UK because they would sort out Irish citizenship, but they did not do so.

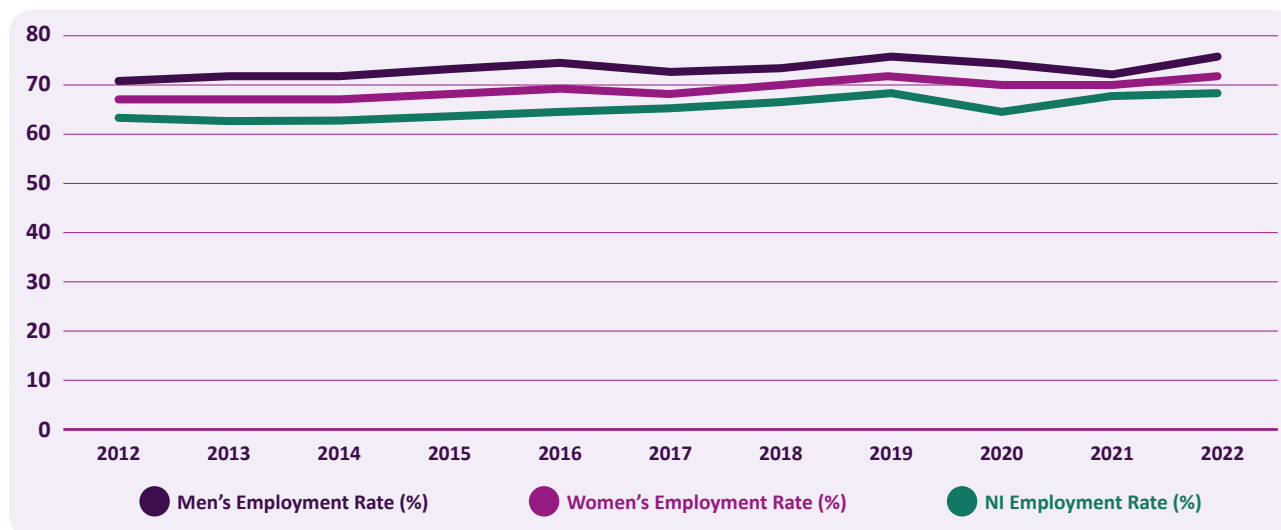
We've really seen this come up multiple times really...This is more misinformation and illegitimate information within the coercive control kind of sphere of domestic abuse.

And this seeps into other departments where, for example, when we were making recommendations around this data sharing, as part of our participation in the Executive Office's violence against women and girls strategy co-design, that misinformation is accepted as fact. We were told, 'Oh, well, we can't put this in the strategy because there are legal obligations for PSNI to share this with the home office', there aren't! Sorry. And the NI Assembly team has investigated and issued a report and said as much. And so the burden is on us, like a small service provision organization to disprove this to the statutory departments whose job it is to know this, you know. **Expert Seminar.**

## 7.2 Employment

In terms of understanding women's position in the labour market, as figure 7 shows the gap between women and men's employment rates was the smallest in 2021 but has since widened, the current employment rate for men is 75% and 67.7% for women. Across the reporting period, between 2012 and 2022, women were employed less in paid work than men. While this cannot be ascribed to Brexit per se, it is part of the wider context of understanding its potential impact, with women more likely to undertake unpaid caring responsibilities within the home, as discussed above.

**Figure 7 Employment by sex, aged 16-64 in NI**



Source: Labour Force Survey<sup>155</sup>

Women who participated in this research wondered who might provide jobs for them in the future, given the dwindling options, including as a result of Brexit, and the perceived lack of any investment strategies. Employment opportunities in some border communities have been eroded over many decades and there is a particular gendered dimension to this. The linen industry in the north-west predominantly employed women<sup>156</sup> and the impact of the decline of that sector is reflected well by these women from a border community but was a concern shared by many of the women we spoke to:

Well, we'll go back, go back 30 years ago, right and the population of [the local town] wasn't as big as it is now right. And you had the nylon factory, you had the mill, you had the shirt factory, you have - all that has gone. The lock factory, you had the candle factory before that, all that has gone and there's nothing coming in. So, you know the town's grown, but the jobs have just [gone].

**Focus Group.**

[now] there's no work...we had all those factories, in our days you left school and went to the factory. Or you went onto the mill or you went you know wherever. **Focus Group.**

155 NISRA (2022) [Labour Force Survey](#)

156 Causeway Coastal Route (Accessed May 2023) [Industrial Heritage](#); McClements, F., (2017) [Shirt tales- An Irishwoman's Diary on Derry's world-beating shirt factories](#), The Irish Times

Many women we spoke to discussed potential opportunities arising from future policies and investments as a result of changes brought about through the Protocol/Windsor Framework. Many of the research participants expressed a belief that the economy of Northern Ireland is not a priority for the UK Government, with consequences for family units.

Overall, the unemployment rate in Northern Ireland is 2.8%, much lower than the post-2007/8 recession peak of 8.2% in Jun-Aug 2012. In year ended 2021, around 3 in 5 women employees were in flexible work compared to 2 in 5 men.<sup>157</sup> There is a gendered aspect to economic inactivity with 25.5% women inactive due to family and care reasons compared to 6.8% men. However, the proportion who are inactive due to family and home care reasons has reduced significantly over the past 25 years. Long term sickness is now the biggest contributor to inactivity (this is more prevalent among men; 44.4% compared to 36.3% among women).

This wider context is relevant to perceptions about Brexit, because a significant theme arising from the women we spoke to was the potential for the fear of an erosion of women's rights in the labour market due to Brexit, especially given that they are more likely to be in flexible employment as compared to males. In some circumstances the rights of women in the workplace were noted to be lacking. This woman described how her organisation supports companies with pre-employment plans for women, noting that there are already gaps in the provision of rights:

...already with the laws that we have in place, the workplace isn't great, without taking them already out. **Focus Group.**

### 7.3 The rural economy

While most of the population in Northern Ireland live in urban areas<sup>158</sup>, the rural economy remains important, making a strong contribution to the GDP. Agriculture and food and drink processing contribute 4% of Gross Value Added compared to 2.1% in the UK.<sup>159</sup> The intersection of different issues including economy, farming and gender equality was evident through our conversations. Although we have isolated the rural economy in this section, it was clear from our interviews that many intersecting issues influence the choices that women in rural areas have. This woman presents it well, but this was a perception reflected by many women in rural areas we spoke to:

---

157 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, (2022), [Women in Northern Ireland 2020/21](#), NISRA

158 Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, (2022) [Statistical review of NI agriculture 2007 onward](#), DAERA

159 Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, (2021) [Northern Ireland Agri-Food Sector: Key Statistics](#), DAERA

On a lot of the small farms, some women do have still, a very challenging time.... I know of cases where some of the women don't have access to the finance the way they should...I do think, in rural areas, particularly in some farms, women are highly controlled...**Interview.**

The interviewee went on to suggest that although many women do a significant number of activities on the farm as discussed above, this is not universally the case. This suggests that gender equality legislation is important for many women, and so the prospect of dynamic alignment with evolving EU legislation that strengthens women's rights is critically important.

Agriculture and farming are important socially and culturally as many individuals in Northern Ireland have direct connections with rural areas, and the sector supports jobs upstream and downstream e.g., engineering; construction; and services. This was perfectly articulated by one rural woman, whose perceptions are reflective of many of the women we spoke to:

...we sustain 113,000 jobs here...if you go around mid-Ulster and you see all the engineering, all the work, every form of engineering...But if you take agriculture out of these areas, you won't have those communities, you won't have the community groups, everybody, even though we have many farmers here. The census has just come out ... 79% of farms here are very small. They are part time farmers....a lot of the jobs they have are engineering, quarrying, working in abattoirs... **Interview.**

Seventy-nine percent of farms in Northern Ireland are small family farms. The Agriculture and Rural Development Affairs Committee recognises that historically women's participation in the agriculture sector has been overlooked. Decisions are typically taken as a household, there are high levels of off-farm employment and many women manage paperwork within the farm.<sup>160</sup> The shift away from the Common Agricultural Policy (as a direct result of Brexit) brings with it very real business risks as many farm businesses would no longer be viable without direct payments – 83% of farm incomes are derived from subsidies.<sup>161</sup>

---

160 Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (2022), ['Breaking the Grass Ceiling' Challenges Women Experience in the Local Agriculture Sector](#), Northern Ireland assembly website

161 Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (2022) [Farm Incomes in Northern Ireland \(2020/21\)](#), DAERA website

Uncertainty around how agricultural policy will evolve in the longer term was a real source of anxiety for some of the women we spoke to who are connected to the farming community. This brings with it major knock-on implications for the wider economy and community and has implications for women as many women in farming households manage the finances.<sup>162</sup>

...how important our agricultural industry is to all our communities and our employment. And also, how important for farm families, because those families in the community support the community, all our resources, our GAA, our sport, our schools, our post office, our employment, the family life...**Interview.**

## 7.4 Border communities

Trading relations mean that any significant barriers to the flow of goods and services between Northern Ireland and its key markets could be very destabilising as it would raise the costs of doing business in Northern Ireland, with wider ripple impacts for society as articulated in discussions with women during a focus group:

‘So he lives in [town in ROI] and obviously where his shop is [in Derry], where he’s getting stuff delivered to for a business that he’s going forward with....[is more expensive]. **Focus Group.**

This has implications for women in families with businesses, including in border communities. The women quoted above went on to explain that to get items delivered directly into Derry was going to cost several thousands of Euros whereas if he got them delivered into a nearby town in Ireland it would cost less than half that amount of money. Such ‘technical issues’, which result in additional costs, arising over a small geographical area had huge implications for families and for women, as this interviewee explains:

...technical issues for people who are cross-border workers, or who live on the border, and their child maybe goes to nursery. I think are the issues which affect people’s everyday lives...I think it’s not fair to say they are unintended consequences they’re un-thought of consequences that people sitting in Westminster have no clue about what, how it impacts on people’s lives, and particularly women’s lives as they can go about the care of their families. **Interview.**

162 Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (2022), [‘Breaking the Grass Ceiling’ Challenges Women Experience in the Local Agriculture Sector](#), Northern Ireland assembly website

Travelling across the border between the UK and Ireland has been at times problematic for non-EU migrant women and their families in Northern Ireland due to the requirement that almost all non-EU citizens/non-CTA Nationals in Northern Ireland are required to apply for a visa in advance of entry into the Republic of Ireland.<sup>163</sup> Prior to Brexit, Irish and UK governments had a long history of not imposing immigration restrictions for each other's citizens, a matter that became increasingly irrelevant due to membership of the EU. The **Ireland–UK Common Travel Area (CTA)**, which predates Brexit, was established, partly to avoid passport border controls on the island of Ireland. One of the commitments of the NI Protocol/Windsor Framework was to avoid a hard border. There are significant existing challenges for non-EU citizens and non-CTA nationals that they face when crossing the border, due to the restrictive nature of the CTA. Thus, a complex intersection of issues have effectively constrained some family movements with particular impacts for women. As the following example identified by North West Migrants' Forum and CAJ demonstrates, it also underpins their claim that 'racial inequalities are currently embedded in the CTA':

Family 2: H is an Ethiopian citizen married to an Irish citizen who lives in Muff, Co. Donegal. Her children go to school in Derry. Because she is excluded from freedom of movement under the current CTA rules, she is unable to drop or collect her children from school, unable to attend her children's parent meetings, take her children to social events or take part in any school activities as a parent. This means she cannot fully perform her parental duties or participate in any aspect of her children's school life.<sup>164</sup>

Post Brexit, it has been pointed out that the development of CTA reciprocal rights have been expressly developed as largely applying only to British and Irish citizens<sup>165</sup>. In addition, the UK Government is to introduce a new requirement for an Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) for people who do not need a visa to come to the UK.<sup>166</sup> It will apply to EU citizens and non-EU nationals (with possible exemptions for persons with retained EU rights under the Withdrawal Agreement). This interpretation of the CTA as restricted to Irish and British citizens risks cross-border mobility with implications for migrant women<sup>167</sup>.

---

163 North West Migrants Forum and Committee on the Administration of Justice, (2021) [CTA and Freedom of Movement on the Island of Ireland, Policy Brief](#), North West Migrants Forum website

164 Ibid.

165 Ibid.

166 UK [Government Guidance on Electronic Travel Authorisation \(ETA\)](#)

167 North West Migrants Forum and Committee on the Administration of Justice, (2021) [CTA and Freedom of Movement on the Island of Ireland, Policy Brief](#), North West Migrants Forum website

Participants also reported their experiences of farms that straddle the border. In these places geography really matters with landscape contours over-riding political boundaries:

...his wife teaches in the North, they actually live in Derry but his business is cross-border. Like many people here, a lot of people here farm cross-border, they have land in the north and land over the border. Because when you talk about Derry-Strabane, that is the reality. **Interview.**

Since the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in 1998, the border has been porous, facilitating movement between the North and South of the island. Markings are non-existent in many places and many families and individuals cross the border many times over the course of a single day.

...you get a beep on your phone to tell you [you've crossed the border], and then two minutes later you get a beep when you go back over and so forth... you switch from kilometres to miles on your car. **Expert Seminar.**

...this is a woman in her mid-70s, living in a border area in a small village, fairly isolated due to health...she was very, very anxious, but does seven border crossings...to the next town, and seven back. What that would actually mean in practice, if something changes. **Expert Seminar.**

Some women expressed concern over the difficulty of moving across the border were that border to be hardened. This issue combined with few economic opportunities could jeopardise peace.

...but it speaks to really powerful emotions that people have around Brexit... fear is the prevailing emotion...there is a real fear about going back, a fear that violence will return... it's the disruption and being watched...it's still a very, very unwelcome return to a sense of living in a militarized zone. **Expert Seminar.**

## 7.5 Data and reporting on women's status

The UK leaving the EU means it will no longer provide data to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) Gender Equality Index<sup>168</sup> nor to Eurostat. These data sources have provided an important tool for cross-state benchmarking for the third and women's sector to use in advocacy, including in Northern Ireland. To understand where there has been progress (or backsliding) on gender equality, and to holding government accountable. In addition, as a result of Brexit (and with the exception of Northern Ireland due to the Protocol/Windsor Framework), the UK no longer shares

---

168 European Institute for Gender Equality (2020) [Note on Brexit and UK-Specific Content](#).



the same legislative and policy frameworks as the EU (although they will share international legislative references, e.g., the Istanbul Convention), which provides a further barrier to such comparisons.<sup>169</sup>

Further, there are already existing gaps in the collection and publication of gender equality data in Northern Ireland, including for example, in the area of gender pay gap reporting; particularly when compared with Great Britain and Ireland where this data is already been collected, as referred to above. This underscores the importance of the UK Government and the NI Executive in Northern Ireland aligning with the requirements of the proposed EU Pay Transparency Directive, if implemented.

## 7.6 Summary and recommendations

### Summary

The ruptures to communities and families have a particular impact on women given they play an important role in supporting the family unit. Wider economic circumstances may have a ripple effect on women.

Many women are very fearful in relation to the future and many aspects of Brexit including the potential impact on the border; peace; employment opportunities; and general community cohesion.

The intersection of a myriad of issues including Brexit, political stagnation, cost-of-living crisis and the legacy of austerity impacts on women's everyday lives.

Migrant women subjected to domestic abuse may be unaware of their rights and may be vulnerable where they rely on partners to help them secure their legal immigration status.

The weak economy and declining employment opportunities for border communities was considered by many women to diminish prospects for them and their families.

The loss of the ability, post Brexit, to benchmark the status of women in Northern Ireland against other EU member states removes an important advocacy tool for understanding gender equality in comparative context.

---

169 Copeland, P., Minto, R., (2021) [European Networks, Domestic Governance and the Second-Order Effects of Brexit](#), British Politics

## Recommendations

- q) **Explore the impact of Brexit on employment for women in border and rural communities.** The Department for the Economy should examine the impact of Brexit on employment opportunities for women, particular for those living in border and rural communities, given perceptions amongst women that challenging economic opportunities diminish prospects for them and their families.
- r) **Review the impact of post Brexit cross border travel requirements.** The Home Office should review post Brexit changes, and proposed changes, to cross border travel requirements to assess the impact on women in Northern Ireland, particularly minority ethnic and migrant women living in border and rural communities, and to take measures to address/mitigate barriers identified.
- s) **Continue to collect comparable data on women's status.** The UK Government, and relevant NI Departments should continue to collect and publish comparable data in line with the European Gender Equality Index and should come to an agreement with the EU to continue to submit data to the European Gender Equality Index to enable continued benchmarking against comparator nations. In the absence of an agreement, the UK Government and relevant NI Departments should commit to collecting and publishing this data on a regular basis. This data should include disaggregated data on women in NI so that it is comparable at EU level.
- t) **Address gaps in the collection/publication of data on women.** NI Departments should also take steps to address any gaps in collection and/or publication of data, post Brexit, relating to women in Northern Ireland so as to ensure the effective policy and service delivery and to fulfil obligations under Section 75 of the NI Act 1998.
- u) **Address gaps in information/support for migrant women experiencing domestic violence.** The Home Office, and the Executive Office should take steps to increase awareness amongst migrant women experiencing domestic abuse of their rights relating to securing immigration status, and to increase guidance and support for them on securing their immigration status post Brexit.

## 8. The Post-Brexit Funding Landscape for Women

---

In this section we provide an overview of EU funds and how they supported women in Northern Ireland before moving on to present the replacement funds, including the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. As we do, we highlight issues raised in our own research and elsewhere, relating to the capacity of UKSPF to support the needs of Section 75 groups; the challenges arising from the gap in funds during the transition period and the implications for the delivery of services from which women benefit.

### 8.1 The loss of European funding

Various EU funding streams, particularly the PEACE programme, have supported the activities of women's groups and individual women in Northern Ireland (see: [European funding in Northern Ireland](#)). Many of the beneficiaries of EU funded projects in Northern Ireland are Section 75 groups. For example, the Women and Peacebuilding: Sharing the Learning project funded through PEACE III sought to give women living in communities recovering from the worst impact of the conflict a voice.<sup>170</sup> It is interesting to note how that project found that peace had been negotiated behind closed doors by elected politicians while life continued in communities, often carrying scars of armed conflict (ibid). Given the findings from our research, about how women do not necessarily feel that their voices have been listened to in relation to Brexit, work to give voice to women will continue to have importance in the future. However, as we will show in this chapter, the focus of the replacement funds, the Shared Prosperity Funds (SPF), to date does not indicate that this is a consideration or even a priority area.

Within the European Social Fund, men's participation was higher overall across ESF funded programmes (58%) whereas at 67.2% women's participation was higher in the Community Family Support Programme.<sup>171</sup> Concerns and problems arising out of the replacement for EU funding were exacerbated by the fact that many of the beneficiaries of EU funded projects in Northern Ireland, including women's groups, had already been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.<sup>172</sup>

---

170 McWilliams M., Kilmurray, A., (2015) [From the global to the local: Grounding UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security in post conflict policy making](#), Women's Studies International Forum

171 Department for the Economy, (2020) [An Impact Evaluation of the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme, 2014-20](#)

172 O'Connell, R., Cunningham, T., (2022) [Impact of Brexit on Section 75 Equality Groups in Northern Ireland: EU Funding](#), ECNI

The loss of funding from ESF and uncertainty regarding securing adequate replacement funding has had a significant impact on the women's sector, as this research participant explains:

...obviously that's an immediate impact right on the ground. You know many women's [and third] sector organizations are deliverers of that vision... they've been vocal about...making staff redundant, and they're putting staff on protective notice...So there'll be clear impacts then on all the women and kind of families that they would work with. **Interview.**

So significant are the funds for the sector that a demonstration was staged in Belfast in March 2023 to highlight the impending crisis (ESF funding ended on 31st March) as many groups faced a 'cliff edge' in terms of funding.

The loss of EU funds as a result of Brexit is a significant threat to a continuation of services, including those provided by the women's sector, with Women's Aid describing the current funding landscape for the sector as 'patchwork'.<sup>173</sup> This is exemplified by women's refuges, which have been funded in Northern Ireland through the Supporting People Programme. However, levels of funding have reduced significantly in the last decade – the budget has not changed since 2009 despite rising inflation costs.<sup>174</sup> This has perpetuated a decrease in life-saving refuge beds and the knock-on impact of that is that women and their children move away from their existing networks of family members and support networks, further isolating the victim and therefore increasing the likelihood that they will return to their perpetrator.<sup>175</sup> Loss of EU funding compounded by a challenging economic context as a consequence of austerity therefore limits statutory protections of victims' rights, thus victims of domestic abuse will be left with fewer resources and services to access, in an already significantly under-resourced sector. As one of our interviewees points out:

... many women's, sector organizations are deliverers [of services to women]... the removal of those services from the communities [will have] clear impacts on the women and families that they would work with...**Interview.**

---

173 Women's Aid, (2021) [Fragile Funding Landscape](#), Women's Aid

174 16 Days of Action – Women's Aid NI 2022 <https://www.womensaidni.org/assets/uploads/2022/11/FINAL-16-Days-of-Action-Womens-Aid-NI-2022-2.pdf>

175 Bellotti, E., Boethius, S., Akerstrom, M., Hyden, M., (2021), [Ambivalent and Consistent Relationships: The Role of Personal Networks in Cases of Domestic Violence](#), Social Inclusion

## 8.2 Post-EU funds: the UK Shared Prosperity Fund

The Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) is part of a suite of replacement funds administered by the UK Government's 'Levelling Up' agenda as part of the post-Brexit development of funds and is intended to reduce inequalities between communities.<sup>176</sup> In one interview we heard how the loss of EU funding was dealt with by the UK government:

The UK prosperity fund was originally billed by the UK government as the replacement, and also promises were made about 'not a penny less'. We've been round the houses for years on this, we finally got the first call for applications just before Christmas, and the amount of money in that first call is about half what we would have got from Europe. **Interview.**

The interviewee goes on to explain how although the overall funds are not that different due to the need for government match funding, a major difference is that the UK SPF does not bring other departments together to co-fund it. Thus...

... it becomes a big issue of domestic policy and domestic policy responsibilities to pick up this area of, particularly European Social Fund, and then trying to shape the UK shared prosperity fund into something that you know is half decent...you know, a couple of years ago they were promising a public consultation which just vanished into thin air...**Interview.**

The overly burdensome nature of EU funds has been recognised, and the fact that SPF seeks to streamline bureaucracy is a positive thing. However, there is a sense that this is at the expense of accountability, transparency and objectivity.<sup>177</sup> The impact of this for women is as yet unknown. For instance, the way in which Section 75 duties are to be dealt with is unclear; both in terms of delivery and governance of SPF as reflected in this statement from the UKSPF website:<sup>178</sup>

While DLUHC is not a designated body for the purposes of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we recognise the importance of not only meeting our legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010 but also giving due regard to the additional equalities considerations that apply in Northern Ireland. In designing the fund, we have considered our public sector equality duties under the Equality Act 2010, as well as the 9 section 75 categories in Northern Ireland.

---

176 McAreevey, R., (2022) [Looking Back to Go Forward: A Review of Rural Development Funding Processes and Delivery](#), Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network

177 Ibid; O'Connell, R., Cunningham, T., (2022) [Impact of Brexit on Section 75 Equality Groups in Northern Ireland: EU Funding](#), ECNI

178 UK Government, (Accessed May 2023) [UKSPF: additional information for Northern Ireland](#)

In their report for the Equality Commission, O’Connell and Cunningham<sup>179</sup> recommend that, given the experiences of existing government departments in Northern Ireland in dealing with the local context including Section 75 requirements, the SPF ought to be delivered through existing structures in Northern Ireland for adequate monitoring and accountability (currently upholding Section 75 duties are not applicable to any Westminster Department which also means that there is no monitoring role for ECNI).<sup>180</sup> However, the shortcomings of using NI government delivery structures also needs to be recognised. McAreavey’s<sup>181</sup> study on the rural development programme identified a number of challenges including those relating to power relations and gender equality: overall women’s participation in the programme was lower than that of men, including within the governing structures and as beneficiaries. O’Connell and Cunningham highlight the need for clarity about how replacement funds will support equality of opportunity and good relations for some of the most disadvantaged groups in Northern Ireland including women from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Regarding delivery, in NI SPF funds are distributed centrally by DLUHC, this is in contrast to the rest of the UK where the fund will be allocated across the UK using formulas after which local areas submit investment plans. A number of risks have been identified with this approach including that it may focus on matters of concern in England, funding projects that are not considered a priority in the jurisdiction<sup>182</sup> or that will lead to duplication or fragmentation of services.<sup>183</sup> Ultimately this could potentially sideline structural issues that need to be addressed to promote equality of opportunity.<sup>184</sup>

In a debate in Westminster MP Claire Hanna reinforced this point:

...Department (DLUHC) is not equality-screened - unlike the Northern Ireland Office and His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. It is not able to legally operate and to run equality impact assessments, which are the law in Northern Ireland. That problem was telegraphed, but the Department has not taken adequate steps to address it. That is why those Departments [Northern Ireland Government departments] have not been able to be involved.<sup>185</sup>

- 
- 179 O’Connell, R., Cunningham, T., (2022) [Impact of Brexit on Section 75 Equality Groups in Northern Ireland: EU Funding](#), ECNI
- 180 ECNI has recommended that DLUHC should be designated under Section 75 and that UK SPF should be delivered by NI departments. See Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, [Policy Recommendations: Impact of Brexit on Section 75 Equality Groups in Northern Ireland: EU Funding](#), (ECNI and NIHRC, 2022)
- 181 McAreavey, R., (2022) [Looking Back to Go Forward: A Review of Rural Development Funding Processes and Delivery](#), Northern Ireland Rural Women’s Network
- 182 Sargeant, J., Stojanovic, A., (2021) [The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020](#) Institute for Government
- 183 McAreavey, R., (2022) [Looking Back to Go Forward: A Review of Rural Development Funding Processes and Delivery](#), Northern Ireland Rural Women’s Network
- 184 O’Connell, R., Cunningham, T., (2022) [Impact of Brexit on Section 75 Equality Groups in Northern Ireland: EU Funding](#), Equality Commission of Northern Ireland
- 185 UK Parliament, (2023) [Hansard Vol 727, 1st February 2023](#)

A key part of the SPF in NI, is a fund for places, Communities and Place Programme, delivered by councils, working in partnership with local community -based partnerships (including charities, NGOs (non-governmental organisations) or similar type organisations), to collaborate to deliver small scale capital interventions. This is similar to the model of local-led development that was used to deliver the last rural development programme. Women were under-represented as beneficiaries of that programme<sup>186</sup>, and there is a danger that their interests will be side-lined in funding streams that replicate this model.

### 8.3 Emerging issues with SPF

European funding was targeted in a way that was respectful of subsidiarity, in other words the European Commission's role was minimal and took account of the efficacy of local structures. Such local administration of funds meant a better understanding of issues on the ground and it contrasts with the proposed dispersal of SPF. As mentioned above, there are concerns around how SPF will take into full account local context and needs. Research by various different bodies has also raised concerns over how much funding will be allocated to Northern Ireland and whether it will be based on need.<sup>187</sup> In the parliamentary debate referred to above, MP Claire Hanna raised further questions about how the SPF will encourage inclusion and target and support smaller organisations (such as local women's groups) and those with barriers to participating in society more widely:

Take back control appears to mean taking back control from some of the funds that have traditionally underpinned progress in Northern Ireland and from local decision makers, and handing it directly to London, without any sense of a strategy that local groups can try to support....several of the reservations that people had about process, strategy, co-ordination and transparency have been borne out. It is worth saying that these concerns are not held just by groups that are applying for funding or by my party. The NI Executive, as was, adopted the position that the best delivery mechanism for the shared prosperity fund would be via existing structures.<sup>188</sup>

---

186 McAreavey, R., (2022) [Looking Back to Go Forward: A Review of Rural Development Funding Processes and Delivery](#), Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network

187 O'Connell, R., Cunningham, T., (2022) [Impact of Brexit on Section 75 Equality Groups in Northern Ireland: EU Funding](#), Equality Commission of Northern Ireland; Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment, (2021) [Future funding for disability employment services](#), Triangle Housing; Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, [ESF User Group Briefing Paper, November 2021](#), page 8.

188 UK Parliament, (2023) [Hansard Vol 727, 1st February 2023](#)

The same MP went on to describe how with the allocation for the SPF in Northern Ireland at £127m, it is losing on average £23m per annum, creating a massive gap for funded groups. She then explained the wider impact of the loss of these funds for particular social groups, including women's organisations:

...dozens of projects across Northern Ireland, particularly those supporting younger people, women and minorities, are at risk. First Steps Women's Centre is a vital part of the community sector in Mid Ulster, working to integrate new and minority ethnic communities, providing crèche facilities to support women back into work and signposting people to other partners who can help them with the multitude of issues they may face.<sup>189</sup>

The timing for the implementation of the SPF has been problematic. As noted earlier, the break that occurred between EU funding and UKSPF created something of a 'cliff edge' that previous research recommended that government should avoid.<sup>190</sup> There will be organisations, many of which target women, which have previously relied on EU funding which will experience a gap in funding. This has been damaging for staff morale, but it has created uncertainty, affecting the ability of women's groups to plan and to deliver services, or even to survive. Ultimately the removal of EU funding has resulted in a loss of capacity at the very local level.<sup>191</sup> There are serious implications for the delivery of services for women. BBC reports how Kilcooley Women's Centre in Ards and North Down, supporting women through childcare; health and wellbeing services will not have its £900,000 EU funding replaced.<sup>192</sup> It also highlights how other women's organisations, including the Women's Centre in Derry, stand to lose significant funds. Our informants explained how many women's groups have lost staff and are running on reserves and are considering their options for more security, with this activity diverting them away from important frontline work.

EU funds are based on a seven-year cycle in contrast to the three years for the SPF. This is problematic as it does not take account of the time taken to develop meaningful relationships, especially when working in communities where there are complex issues to be addressed and where trust can be in deficit.<sup>193</sup>

---

189 Ibid.

190 O'Connell, R., Cunningham, T., (2022) [Impact of Brexit on Section 75 Equality Groups in Northern Ireland: EU Funding](#), Equality Commission of Northern Ireland

191 Ibid.

192 Haslam, A., (2023) [European Social Fund: Groups face cuts to services despite £57m UK cash](#), BBC News

193 Byrne, S, Skarlato, O, Fissuh, E and Irvin, C (2009) Building Trust and Goodwill in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties: The Impact of Economic Aid on the Peace Process, *Irish Political Studies*, 24:3, 337-363; Campbell, A, Hughes, J, Hewstone, M and Cairns, E (2010) Social capital as a mechanism for building a sustainable society in Northern Ireland, *Community Development Journal*, 45(1), Pp. 22–38



The lack of appreciation of complexity is reflected in the SPF documentation, where generic comments are made about targeting marginalised groups.<sup>194</sup>

### Potential impact of NI budget cuts

In addition, there is a need to consider the cumulative and potential impact, of a loss of EU funding for women and the NI women's sector with the proposed budget cuts to public services. Concerns have, for example, been raised by the women's sector in terms of the serious impact of the proposed cuts to these services for women, as well as the delivery by Departments of key gender related strategies. The women's sector has stressed the need for gender budgeting to help to improve the budgetary process. Further, as noted previously, in May 2023 Department for Communities officials informed stakeholders that in the face of spending cuts associated with its budget for 2023-24, work on the Social Strategies, including the Disability Strategy and the Anti-Poverty Strategy, would be suspended and staff currently working on these would be redeployed.

The political impasse over the Protocol which led to the NI Executive and NI Assembly not sitting, has resulted in the lack of a fully functioning executive able to take crucial budgetary decisions.

## 8.4 Summary and recommendations

### Summary

The full impact of the transition to SPF on the women's sector is not yet fully understood in terms of loss of services; staff and overall capacity, but early indications are that some women's organisations have not, to date, received sufficient replacement funding under the SPF.

European funds supported initiatives specifically designed to give women a voice. It is unclear if SPF will continue to support this activity.

---

194 O'Connell, R., Cunningham, T., (2022) [Impact of Brexit on Section 75 Equality Groups in Northern Ireland: EU Funding](#), Equality Commission of Northern Ireland

## Recommendations

- v) **Ensure Shared Prosperity Funds support services provided to Section 75 equality groups including women.** The Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) should ensure the processes for administering Shared Prosperity Funds continues to support services provided to Section 75 equality groups, including women. In so doing it should review and evaluate the roll out and implementation of the SPF on services to support women and address gaps in funding for essential services that support women.
- w) **Ensure effective funding for women's sector.** The NI Executive, and relevant NI Departments of the NI women's sector, should ensure the long term, effective, resourcing of the NI women's sector, including addressing any gaps in essential services for women, impacted as a result of the loss of EU funding and/or budget cuts.

## 9. Conclusion

---

This report draws attention to the actual, perceived and potential impact of Brexit on women in Northern Ireland. This includes both direct and indirect impacts. It demonstrates that Brexit continues, and will continue for some time, to have an impact on women's day-to-day lives and their rights.

The report highlights how women face challenges in speaking about Brexit, which come to the fore in the public arena where they face targeted abuse. This is particularly acute for minority ethnic women and contributes to a lack of women's voices on Brexit and a perception that Brexit is a 'men's' issue.

It shows how consultations with the women's sector have been limited and not as constructive as they could have been. It demonstrates that going forward prioritising meaningful consultations with the women's sector could help to mitigate further impacts on women in NI.

Such consultations should include finding a way through the political impasse over the Protocol/Windsor Framework, which is an indirect impact of Brexit, and which has stalled the adoption of a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, and other gender-related strategies, despite this being a particularly acute issue for women in NI.

The information vacuum resulting from the prevalence of misinformation and misunderstandings, including by government officials on Brexit and in relation to Section 75 duties, has contributed to a lack of trust amongst women of the key actors which have driven Brexit. This has been exacerbated by a lack of official information on the impact of Brexit for women's day-to-day lives in NI, including but not limited to, in relation to the border.

The complexity of the legal situation vis-à-vis Brexit, and the Protocol/Windsor Framework have further contributed to perceptions that women's rights will be eroded as a result of Brexit. Such complexity means that while we know women have lost some recourse to uphold rights, the full impact will only be known as law develops through court cases. In addition, legal complexity and a lack of accessible official information on Brexit has contributed to women being denied access to health care to which they have a legal entitlement.

The impact of Brexit on the economy is unfolding, but women, in border areas particularly, are fearful of the future. The intersection of myriad issues and crises including Brexit, political stagnation, covid-19, cost-of-living crisis and the legacy of austerity impacts on women's everyday lives were perceived to have contributed to increased community tensions.

Finally, the transition to SPF has had an impact on the women's sector and its ability to deliver services, but its full impact is not yet fully evaluated. It remains unclear if SPF will continue to support initiatives specifically designed to give women a voice in line with European funding.

# Appendix 1:

## Methodological Approach

---

Data collection for the project took place between December 2022 and May 2023. Assessing the gendered impact of Brexit will include identifying where impacts affect both men and women but noting impacts which disproportionately impact, or have a particular impact, on women.

Ethical approval was obtained through Newcastle University. The project was supported by a steering group, and data was collected through desk research, semi-structured interviews, an expert seminar and focus groups.

### Steering group

The establishment of a small project steering group was essential to ensure we connected with ongoing research and civil society activity to ensure the report most effectively added to the existing knowledge base; in addition to ensuring the findings have the potential to generate impact by generating buy-in for the research design and scope. The steering group met once in person and three times virtually, the membership consisted of: Elaine Croy, Women's Resource and Development Agency; Louise Coyle, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network; and Jonna Monaghan, Women's Platform.

### Desk research

In addition to the empirical aspect of the project, a systematic desk review of the literature on Brexit and its impact on women in Northern Ireland was undertaken as the first step. This drew on the breadth of grey and academic literature. Grey material included publications from ECNI, NI Human Rights Commission, BrexitLawNI, NI Rural Women's Network as well as more international literature such as that of Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), United Nations and European Court of Human Rights.

### Expert seminar

The project team hosted an expert seminar Belfast in January 2023. This helped to identify key issues for consideration within the research, as well as identifying organisations and individuals to interview. The Expert Seminar was conducted under Chatham House Rules.

## Focus groups

Six Focus Groups with 32 women were held in person across Northern Ireland in January and February 2023. Each lasted approximately one hour, and were held with targeted groups including representation from:

- Women from minority ethnic/migrant communities (including asylum seekers and refugees)
- Women from rural families, including but not limited to farm families
- Women from disadvantaged communities
- Women living in border areas
- Women with Disabilities
- Women with caring responsibilities
- Women from different community backgrounds
- LGBT women

The steering group were involved in the co-design of focus groups and we tapped into their networks to support participant recruitment. We recognise them as knowledge brokers as they are operating on the front line and there is a strong ethical imperative for engaging them in the research in this way.

Each Focus Group was tailored according to its membership, but themes explored included the gendered impact of Brexit on: education, employment and the workplace; access to services, including support/advocacy and health; political and community engagement; caring responsibilities; and free movement. Participants were recruited in conjunction with key relevant organisations. The Focus Groups were conducted under Chatham House Rule.

## Interviews

Focus groups were supplemented with 11 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders whom we recognise as knowledge brokers. Interviews drilled further into the issues raised through the desk research and the focus groups and also drew on the knowledge base of respondents. Interviewees were drawn from organisations identified for the expert seminar, but also included others identified according to the data generated through the focus groups and desk research.

All interviews were conducted confidentially and lasted for approximately one hour. ECNI had oversight of questions ahead of the interviews. Each interview was tailored according to the key themes identified in the desk research and depending on the expertise of the interviewee. Themes therefore included the actual, potential or perceived impact of Brexit on access to services including education, health and housing; employment and training; discrimination; trafficking; political participation; wellbeing and poverty.

### **Data analysis**

The expert seminar, focus groups and interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed aided by Otter.ai software. Preliminary coding was undertaken to understand the actual, potential and perceived impact of Brexit on women with key findings brought to the steering group before undertaking in-depth thematic analysis. This entailed initial individual reading of transcripts and coding for emerging themes. The team undertook this with the first series of transcripts which means that this occurred as the interviews and focus groups were being completed. This provided a mechanism for the findings to feed into the data collection. Following the completion of all interviews and focus groups, the research team met to discuss and cross-check identified themes and connect them back to the literature review before finalising the analysis.

### **Visual artist**

We engaged an artist to generate visual impressions from the FG discussions through the production of visual minutes (see Appendix 2 and 3). This has provided a resource that will be used to help communicate our research to a wider audience.

## Appendix 2: Visual Minutes Focus Group A





# Appendix 3: Visual Minutes Focus Group B







**Equality Commission  
for Northern Ireland**

Equality House  
7-9 Shaftesbury Square  
Belfast BT2 7DP

**Telephone:** + 44 (0)28 9050 0600

**Email:** [DMU@equalityni.org](mailto:DMU@equalityni.org)

**Web:** [www.equalityni.org](http://www.equalityni.org)



**February 2024**