



NI WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP

NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP (NIWBG) RESPONSE TO THE INQUIRY ON THE IMPACT OF THE RISING COST OF LIVING ON WOMEN

Women and Equalities Committee

Prepared by Alexandra Brennan (Coordinator) of NIWBG

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The Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (NIWBG) is made up of organisations and individuals from the women's sector, trade union movement, academia and wider civil society in Northern Ireland, with the aim of implementing a gender equal economy. The members of the NIWBG scrutinise policy and budgetary matters with a gendered lens to bring attention to the different ways in which women and men are affected by government-level decision-making. It aims to provide policy- and budget-makers with policy analysis to secure substantive equality for women and men through the assessment of gender impact.

The NIWBG works with a range of organisations in Northern Ireland on devolved issues and with sister organisations in Wales, Scotland, England and Ireland on East-West and North-South issues.

We hope that our response to the inquiry will be considered by the Women and Equalities Committee.

If there are any questions or comments regarding the NIWBG's response, please direct them to the Coordinator for the NIWBG, Alexandra Brennan (info@niwbq.org).

Introduction

We welcome this inquiry from the Women and Equalities Committee as we are gravely concerned about the impacts of the rising cost of living on women, especially amid a budget crisis. In this response, we outline the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on women, how the budget crisis adds to this, and the importance of gender budgeting and compliance with equality obligations. We would also like to endorse and direct you to the response provided by the Women's Regional Consortium, as it provides a much more detailed picture of the current impacts faced by many women in Northern Ireland.

The Impact of the Rising Cost of Living on Women

Women are and will be disproportionately impacted by the cost-of-living crisis - this is why it is imperative that action around the crisis has a gendered lens. If the approach to dealing with the crisis is gender-neutral, this not only prevents further gains towards achieving gender equality but erodes progress that has already been made around attaining equality.

Women face disproportionate challenges that require gender-sensitive responses. Households with children will be disproportionately impacted, particularly with the delivery of the punitive budget where cuts to essential programmes like the School Holiday Food Grant, the Happy Healthy Minds scheme and the Extended Schools programme will drive children in Northern Ireland further into poverty. Children's poverty is women's poverty; before children go without food, heat, new clothing, etc., women bear the brunt of these impacts for as long as they can before they cannot help it from impacting on their children¹. Women are more likely to take on childcare responsibilities² and are more likely to be lone parents (91%)³, and lone parents are particularly vulnerable to impacts from the cost-of-living increases due to living off of and taking care of children on a single income. Women are more likely to rely on benefits, be in low-paid and precarious work, earn below the living wage than men, and are more likely to be 'economically inactive,' with Northern Ireland having the highest rate of economic inactivity across the UK. Women's economic outcomes are significantly worse than men's before the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis are added.

These impacts can be worse at the intersection of other identities. For example, women with disabilities will be acutely impacted by this crisis, particularly if they rely on machinery in their day-to-day lives as this will increase energy bills⁴. As with the Covid-19 pandemic, women in rural areas are particularly at risk of isolation during times of crisis. Lack of transportation and lack of quality broadband service in rural areas are barriers to women engaging with public life, and the rising costs of both will further impact on women's ability to leave the home. This is a gendered impact as women are more likely to rely on public transportation to

¹ Women's Policy Group (WPG) (2021). *NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On* ([WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf \(wrda.net\)](#))

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ AdviceNI. *Disability Action – Cost of Living Crisis* (https://www.adviceni.net/about/news/disability-action-cost-living-crisis#_ftn3)

take short journeys to engage in public life, unlike men who are more likely to take it for long journeys, such as commuting to work⁵.

The effects of the cost-of-living crisis will further entrench gender economic inequality in Northern Ireland. The Equality Commission of Northern Ireland has identified women as one of the three groups most impacted by the punishing budget⁶, with young people and people with disabilities as the other two groups worst affected. Women have already faced months on end of not being able to pay for food, heating, getting into arrears on rent, getting into debt, and many getting into debt with illegal lenders such as paramilitaries, due to not being able to meet the rising costs⁷. The cuts to essential public services/schemes during a cost-of-living crisis will further fuel poverty, deprivation, and poor health outcomes. While Northern Ireland currently faces a budget crisis, the financial situation will be much worse in years to come as social and economic equality erodes.

One-off payments to help with rising energy/electric/food bills is not the solution to the cost-of-living crisis. The Government's response has not dealt with any structural issues that have made women vulnerable to the worst impacts of the crisis. Specifically in Northern Ireland, the current budget cuts have further worsened these impacts. We direct the Committee to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and The Trussell Trust 'Guarantee Our Essentials' campaign⁸, which calls for the introduction of an Essentials Guarantee to Universal Credit to ensure those on Universal Credit can afford the essentials. This campaign is widely supported by civil society and would have a long-term impact for those most impacted by the crisis. Long-term measures to tackle the cost-of-living crisis are essential to ensuring that real issues are dealt with, unlike one-off measures that only push the issue further down the line. The 'Guarantee of Essentials' asks along with the Welfare Mitigations Review, commissioned by the NI Department for Communities, are a good foundation for necessary social security reform. Additionally, it is important that any Department developing and/or implementing response measures is designated for the purposes of Section 75. This ensures that measures coming into Northern Ireland from Westminster have the same equality checks that measures would have coming from Stormont.

The Budgetary Process and Gender Budgeting

Gender budgeting requires government departments to analyse the different impact of the budget on people of different genders, starting as early in the budget cycle as possible. The aim of gender budgeting is to ensure that the distribution of resources creates more gender equal outcomes. Over time, gender analysis should become embedded at all stages of the budget process. Women's intersecting identities are also included in this analysis and policymakers are expected to promote these areas of equality as well. There is widespread

⁵ Women's Policy Group (WPG) (2021). *NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On* ([WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf](https://www.wrdanet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf) (wrda.net))

⁶ Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI). (2023). *Briefing Note: Concerns regarding cumulative equality impacts of proposed Departmental Budget allocations for 2023-24* (<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/Budget2023-24-ECNIbriefing-Sept23.pdf>)

⁷ Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (2023). *Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland* (<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Womens-Experiences-of-the-Cost-of-Living-Crisis-in-NI-2.pdf>)

⁸ The Trussell Trust (2023). *Guarantee Our Essentials* (<https://www.trusselltrust.org/get-involved/campaigns/guarantee-our-essentials/>)

political support for gender budgeting in Northern Ireland and a growing evidence base that it can help create a more equal society. In the current budget crisis women will experience particular disadvantages due to pre-existing socio-economic conditions. For example, there is strong evidence that women have suffered disproportionately from over a decade of Westminster austerity measures, the pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis⁹. We cannot afford to continue making decisions at the expense of women and risk further degradations to gender equality and additional intersecting equalities as well.

Not only is there an immediate need for gender budgeting in our current crisis, but the benefits would help to improve the budgetary process. Gender budgeting is good budgeting; it encourages greater transparency of government processes, more in-depth assessments of how policies and budgets affect constituents and closer cooperation between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. It encourages a more targeted approach to the spending of public money, which will improve policy outcomes. Implementing gender budgeting mechanisms would provide decision-makers with the tools to recognise and mitigate gendered economic impacts and promote gender equality. Whilst political crises that affect budget processes are outside the control of decision-makers, strategically embedding gender budgeting measures will create a firewall to prevent such disproportionate disadvantages in future.

We recognise that the current equality screening and impact assessment duties under Section 75 provide policy infrastructure that could be used to progress gender budgeting. The EQIA process allows space to identify budget impacts on women and opportunities to promote more gender equal outcomes. However, too often the analysis included in these documents focuses only on equal treatment or stops at the point of acknowledging pre-existing inequalities. For gender budgeting to be fully implemented, the next stage must be to reformulate budgets and budgetary policy with targeted measures to improve outcomes for women and girls. Additionally, Section 75 screening and impact assessment typically takes place at the very end of the budget planning process or after the budget has been finalised. The OECD¹⁰ highlights that best practice for gender budgeting is to embed it at all levels of policy- and budget-making: planning, formulation, approval, implementation, monitoring and reformulation. It is crucial that gender equality obligations are not a 'tick-box exercise,' but rather that gender equality is mainstreamed in every area of the budgetary process through gender analysis of data supported by experts from civil society.

Please see **Annex 1** for more on gender budgeting.

⁹ MacDonald, E.M. (2018) The gendered impact of austerity: Cuts are widening the poverty gap between women and men. British Politics and Policy at LSE. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/gendered-impacts-of-austerity-cuts/>

Charlton, E. (2023) This is Why Women are Bearing the Brunt of the Cost of Living Crisis According to Research. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/cost-of-living-crisis-women-gender-gap/>

¹⁰ OECD (2023), OECD Best Practices for Gender Budgeting, OECD Journal on Budgeting, vol. 23/1, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9574ed6f-en>.

Equality Obligations

Including equality considerations in the budgets and policy-making process requires gender disaggregated data, departmental-specific and high-level equality objectives and monitoring structures. The lack of gender-disaggregated data hinders our ability to effectively advocate on behalf of women and leaves decision-makers with data that presents a false narrative – one where the diversity of experiences between women and men is unaccounted for and therefore absent in crucial policy and budgetary decisions.

We recommend that where gender-disaggregated data is available, it must be used to inform the decision-making process. Where there is no gender-disaggregated data, the Department needs to request that it is recorded. Having this information is key to completing the equality analysis required by Section 75. Without it, equality assessments do not capture the realities of existing inequalities that contribute to worse impacts felt by women during the cost-of-living crisis and they lack the robust evidence needed to influence policy and budgets.

This assessment is required at the earliest opportunity in the policy-making process and as further decisions are made in finalising the policy, not only to inform Level 5 decision-makers about their policy's effects on equality, but to ensure the policy is both clear and transparent regarding the assessment of predicted impacts. It is essential that sufficient consideration of gender inequality, paired with robust evidence, is reflected in this document to secure equality outcomes.

Conclusion

It is crucial that gender analysis is incorporated into all mitigation measures taken, and that meaningful engagement with the community/voluntary sector and, most importantly, those with lived experience, is at the centre of all responses to the crisis. We would be happy to meet with the Committee to further discuss our response or to assist this inquiry in any way that may be helpful.

ANNEX 1



BRIEF ON GENDER BUDGETING

Budgetary processes and spend are far from 'neutral' – policies emanating from the Programme for Government and budgetary decisions have gendered consequences, whether they be intended or not. By taking a 'gender neutral' stance, decision-makers are oblivious to the complexities between the experiences of women and men and reinforce systemic disadvantages faced by women and other groups.

What is Gender Budgeting?

Gender budgeting is the tool that can help recognise systemic disadvantages and lead to budgets and policies that promote greater gender equality. If implemented, policy makers would consider the gendered impacts of spending and revenue raising decisions and how to use these mechanisms to bring about gender equality. Women's intersecting identities are also included in this analysis and policy makers are expected to promote these areas of equality as well.

In [Gender budgeting: Working paper 1](#), our partners Dr. Joan Ballantine, Dr. Michelle Rouse and Professor Ann Marie Gray highlight that, "*Northern Ireland lags significantly behind other devolved UK administrations and other OECD countries,*" where gender budgeting has "*made a significant contribution to addressing gender inequalities, the elimination of unequal outcomes and to increasing women's participation in civic and political life.*"¹¹

It is important to note that gender budgeting is not about allocating more funds to women but about making sure the available resources have maximum impact. The [European Women's Lobby](#) breaks down the realities and misconceptions about gender budgeting as follows¹²:

Gender budgeting is about:

- *Including a gender perspective into budget planning and analysing budgets taking into account their impact on women and men, girls and boys.*
- *Introducing a gender perspective into the entire budget, including seemingly "gender-neutral" budget lines.*
- *Reprioritising and refocusing of spending and restructuring of taxation with a view to promote equality.*

Gender budgeting is not about:

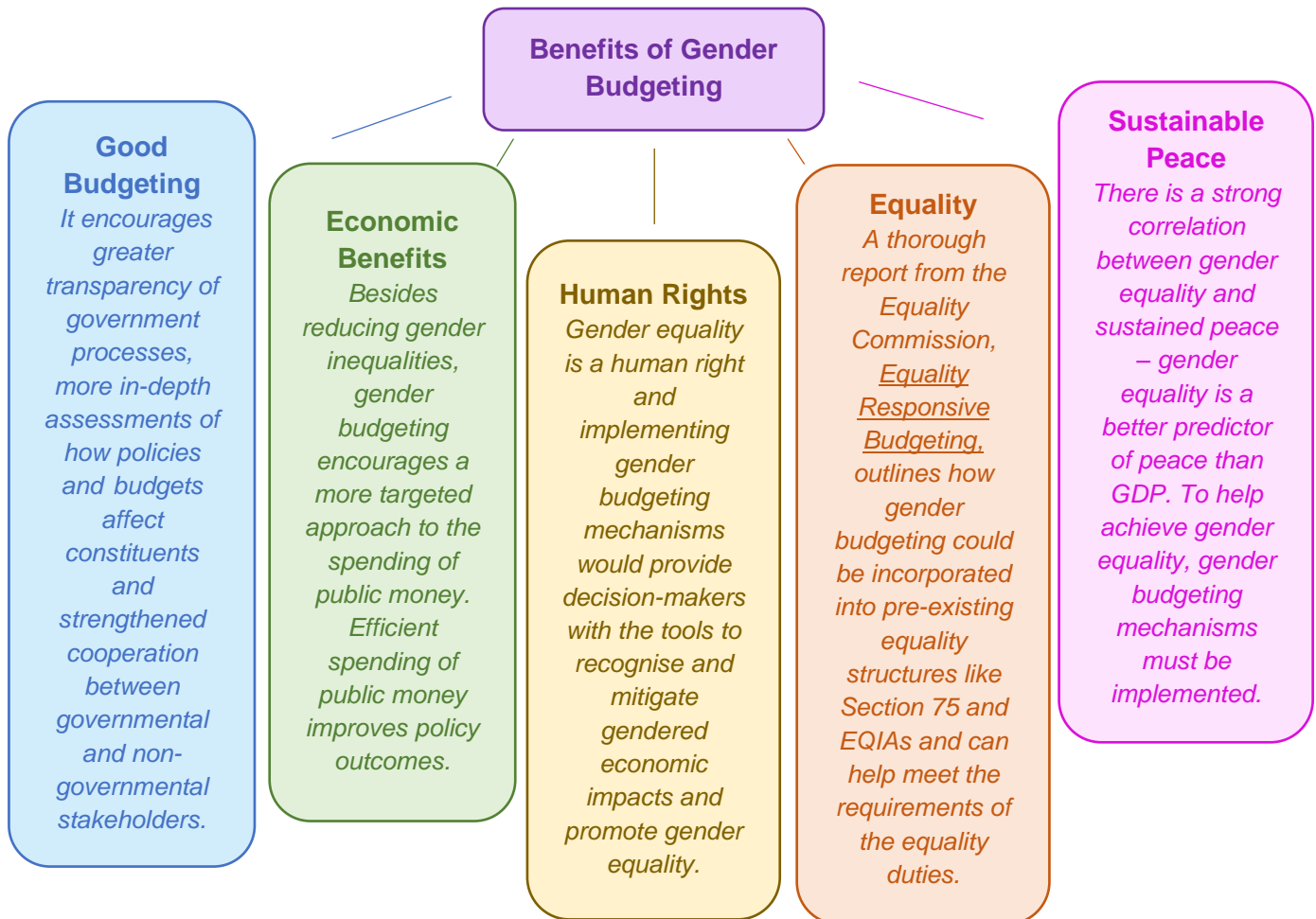
- *Creating separate budgets for women.*
- *Only looking at the parts of the budget which have a social content or that are explicitly gender-related.*
- *Demanding more spending.*

¹¹ Ballantine, J., Rouse, M. and Gray, A.M. (2021). *Gender Budgeting: Working Paper 1: What does the literature tell us? Lessons for Northern Ireland (NI)*. ([Gender Budgeting-1.pdf](#))

¹² European Women's Lobby. *What is Gender Budgeting?* ([What Is Gender Budgeting.pdf](#))

Why implement Gender Budgeting?

Gender budgeting is transformative, enhances transparency and accountability, and is of value in delivering economic benefits¹³, rights and equality¹⁴, and securing sustainable peace¹⁵.



¹³ Himmelweit, S. (2002). 'Making visible the hidden economy: the case for gender-impact analysis of economic policy,' *Feminist Economics*. 8 (1), 49-70.

¹⁴ Quinn, S. (2013). *Equality responsive budgeting*. ([Equality Responsive Budgeting \(equalityni.org\)](http://equalityresponsivebudgeting.org))

¹⁵ Fernanda Espinosa, M. (2020). *Peace Is Synonymous With Women's Rights*. (<https://www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/peace-synonymous-women%E2%80%99s-rights>)