



# NI WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP

**NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP (NIWBG) RESPONSE TO THE  
DRAFT SKILLS STRATEGY  
Department for the Economy (DfE)  
Prepared by Alexandra Brennan (Coordinator) of NIWBG  
August 2021**

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 consultation will be considered by the Department for the Economy when finalising the Skills Strategy.

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

The NIWBG welcomes the Department's development of the Skills Strategy. We believe it has the potential to:

- Improve skills attainment for crucial sectors
- Eradicate labour market segregation
- Rid all sectors of low-pay and precarious work
- Encourage inclusive, economic growth

While the current Strategy will contribute in some way to these goals, we believe that the Department can and should commit to a more comprehensive, ambitious plan to promote an economy based on equality, care, and sustainability. Along with this response, the NIWBG endorses the responses of the Women's Support Network and the Women's Policy Group.

## **Skills Barometer**

A concern of the NIWBG's is that the Skills Barometer was used as the "primary evidence base" to develop the proposed Strategy. Based on a working paper<sup>1</sup> published by the Ulster University research team consisting of Prof. Ann Marie Gray, Prof. Joan Ballantine and Dr. Michelle Rouse, the Barometer only considers economic value in terms of productivity and may assign lesser economic value to skills associated with social care.

This is an issue for the Strategy as the Barometer's inability to view economic value outside of productivity means that it "remains under responsive to an impending skills crisis in the social care sector". The 2019 Skills Barometer report<sup>2</sup> predicted 'Caring Personal Services' to be a notable contributor to job growth in the next decade, yet there are no plans in this Strategy to deal with this forecasted demand. Even though it indicated that 'Caring Personal Services' was going to be one of the largest contributors to job growth in the next decade, it is incapable of predicting the skills required to meet that demand. This is echoed by the contents of the Strategy and the Report - neither of which prepares for the impending skills crisis in social care nor the predicted care crisis.

The NIWBG recommends that career pathways and pay progression are put in place for low-paid, precarious work like care, and that funding is increased for apprenticeships that are considered highly skilled yet require low-level qualifications, such as social care apprenticeships.

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<sup>1</sup> Ballantine, J., Rouse, M. and Gray, A.M. (2021). *Gender Budgeting: Working Paper 2: Case Study: Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland*. ([Gender Budgeting-2.pdf \(ark.ac.uk\)](https://ark.ac.uk/ark:/62145/c78888))

<sup>2</sup> Ulster University Economic Policy Centre. (2019). *NI Skills Barometer 2019*. (<https://bit.ly/3joO7nv>)

An additional and significant blindspot in the Barometer’s analysis is that upskilling is netted out of the forecast of future skills requirements. In a 2015 report<sup>3</sup> on the Barometer, it was mentioned that upskilling was not considered when predicting future skills requirements based on the belief that, “these individuals are already in the labour market, will remain with their current employers after training and do not represent additional supply to the labour market.” As upskilling is netted out of the forecast, the Barometer does not look at the benefits of increasing the skill set of those already in the workforce. Social care apprenticeships, though highly-skilled, need low levels of qualifications. The exclusion of upskilling from the Barometer’s predictions means that women with low-level qualifications that need to upskill to perform their duties, like many in social care, are going to be disproportionately impacted.

The Strategy refers to upskilling and reskilling opportunities for individuals already in the workforce. However, it is unclear how that need will be assessed when the Barometer’s analysis, which was the “primary evidence base to develop [the] draft strategy,” does not factor in upskilling. The NIWBG refers to the success of the Union Learning Fund (ULF), which is funded by the Department, as it engages employees who have been disadvantaged or excluded from education in skills development and attainment in accredited courses such as English, Maths and IT. With nearly an equal number of women and men participating, it is important to note that a key aspect of the programme focuses on removing barriers to education in the workplace.

Our last concern regarding the Barometer is that there has been no post-COVID analysis of the Barometer’s forecasts. Besides the tool’s narrow view of economic value and netting out of upskilling, the forecast is, at best, compromised by the economic crisis brought on by the pandemic.

## **STEM and Apprenticeships**

In STEM sectors, there is a great gender imbalance – the low representation of women in these positions can be traced back to a gender imbalance in attainment of STEM-based skills. For this reason, the NIWBG welcomes the Department’s efforts to target gender inequality in STEM through the action plans outlined in the Skills Strategy. STEM sectors are an important part of our current economy and will continue to be important in the future – for this reason, addressing gender imbalance in the decade-long Strategy through action plans like ‘Women in STEM’ is essential.

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<sup>3</sup> Ulster University Economic Policy Centre. (2015). *NI Skills Barometer Findings Report: “Skills in demand.”* (<https://bit.ly/3h1qLgU>)

Gender segregation in ApprenticeshipsNI and HLAs is a stark example of why it is important that the Department is making concerted efforts to equalise STEM sectors. This is evident when looking at the estimated GVA for participants – for men, it is £78,400 per participant; for women, it is less than half of that amount at £35,900 per participant<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, the ‘Engineering’ ApprenticeshipsNI programme had a breakdown of 98% male participants versus 2% female participants, and the ‘Engineering & manufacturing technologies’ and ‘Science & mathematics’ HLAs have a breakdown of 90% male versus 10% female participants and 57% male versus 43% female participants, respectively<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to gender imbalances, there is a serious issue of low pay. The minimum wage for apprentices 19 and under and for apprentices over 19 in their first year of apprenticeship is £4.15. This is incredibly low and may prevent single parents, the vast majority of whom are women, and others that require a liveable wage from engaging with the scheme.

The NIWBG supports the Department’s efforts to rectify gender imbalances in STEM, and we recommend that the Department starts with solving gendered labour market segregation and low pay in ApprenticeshipsNI and HLAs.

## Care

Investment in STEM, particularly women in STEM, will be key in securing a thriving economy in the next ten years. However, attention is needed in other skill areas to achieve a successful, balanced and inclusive economy.

Care is one of *the* most essential sectors of our economy – though undervalued long before the pandemic, the halting of paid and unpaid caring services due to the pandemic brought the economy to a stop in March 2020. Without proper investment in care, we will never achieve the goals set out in this Strategy for the economy and skills attainment.

The ‘paid’ care sector is synonymous with low pay, part-time and precarious work, with women disproportionately working in the sector. The unpaid care sector, due to lack of proper support, negatively impacts on the carers’ ability to do paid work and can be an emotional burden on the carer<sup>6</sup>. The pandemic has only exacerbated these pre-existing conditions.

The Strategy mentions the increased automating of careers with greater advancements in technology as a reason for people to obtain skills in STEM. We would argue that, while that is important, there must be a focus on skills associated with care for this very reason. Care

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<sup>4</sup> Gender Budgeting: Working Paper 2 (n 1)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Women’s Policy Group NI (WPG) (2021). *NI Covid-19 feminist recovery plan: Relaunch – one year on*. ([WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf \(wrda.net\)](https://www.wrda.net/Assets/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf))

cannot be automated, and to properly prepare for the impending skills crisis in care, the Strategy needs to have action plans aimed at increasing development and investment in skills associated with care.

Another important aspect related to skills attainment is that, without proper childcare provision, many women will not be able to participate in skills attainment, upskilling, and/or reskilling schemes. The Department must ensure that women will not miss the opportunity to develop their skills due to the lack of accessible and affordable childcare, as this is already a barrier to women's education and employment.

## **Caring, Green Economy**

The NIWBG believes that the only way to recover from the current economic crisis, address gender inequality in the labour market and promote a sustainable and inclusive economy is to implement a caring, green economy as outlined in the Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy's report, *Creating a Caring Economy: A Call to Action*<sup>7</sup>.

Paid and unpaid carers are a crucial part of the economy – a 2015 report<sup>8</sup> conducted by Carers UK and the University of Sheffield found that unpaid carers in Northern Ireland save the economy £4.6 billion a year, or the cost of a second NHS. Additional investment in the entire care sector would both raise revenue and create jobs. The UKWBG found that a 2% investment of UK GDP in the care sector would create 1.5 million jobs, twice the amount that the same investment in the construction sector would produce, producing millions in tax revenue<sup>9</sup>.

The investment in free, universal childcare would not only remove a significant barrier to women's participation in the labour market in Northern Ireland, but it can help raise revenue as well. In a UK Women's Budget Group (UKWBG) report to HM Treasury, their research found that free, universal childcare would create more jobs and as a result, generate additional tax revenue<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, it would alleviate the responsibility of childcare on mothers and would allow those who left the labour market for childcare reasons to return to the paid economy.

Northern Ireland must also play its part in achieving the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. In order to meet the targets, such as Good Health and Well-being

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<sup>7</sup> Commission on a Gender Equal Economy (2020). *Creating a caring economy: a call to action*. (<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WBG-Report-v10.pdf>)

<sup>8</sup> Buckner, L. and Yeandle, S. (2015). *Valuing Carers 2015: The rising value of carers' support*. ([file:///C:/Users/hkerr/Downloads/cuk-valuing-carers-2015-web%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/hkerr/Downloads/cuk-valuing-carers-2015-web%20(2).pdf))

<sup>9</sup> Women's Budget Group (WBG) (2020). *Budget representation to HM Treasury: invest in social infrastructure*. (<WBG-Budget-2020-FINAL.pdf>)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

(SDG3) and Gender Equality (SDG5), increasing investment in employment in low-carbon sectors like care is necessary. De Henau and Himmelweit outlined how an investment in care is three times less polluting per job than the same investment in construction<sup>11</sup>. As well, greater investment and valuation of care would help improve the precarious nature of the sector, making it a more attractive and secure career that would draw both women/girls and men/boys.

The Commission's report provides eight steps to securing a caring, green economy, two of which directly relates to skills attainment and development:

1. Re-envision what we mean by 'the economy' - The pandemic demonstrated how central care, both paid and unpaid, is to our economy. We need to reassess the economic value of care to reflect its importance to the maintenance of the economy.
2. Transform the worlds of paid and unpaid work - The Strategy addresses the need for 'better jobs,' but the NIWBG would contend that 'better jobs' does not only mean jobs in STEM, but rather fixing the aspects that make certain jobs worse, such as precarity and low-pay. This would help correct gender inequalities in the labour market and gender imbalances the sharing of paid and unpaid work.

The recommendations from the Commission's report are echoed in the content of the Women's Policy Group's Feminist Recovery Plan, which was fully updated and relaunched in July 2021. While aspects of the Commission's report are outside the remit of devolved powers, the NIWBG believes it is crucial that the content of the Commission's report and the Feminist Recovery Plan inform the Department's plans for the economy and skills development in the upcoming decade.

## **'Better' Jobs**

The NIWBG acknowledges the awareness in the strategy of the severe gender imbalance within STEM education and employment and appreciates the action plans outlined in the Strategy to tackle gender inequality within those sectors. However, moving more women into STEM careers, which the Department repeatedly refers to as "better jobs" throughout the Strategy, is a partial, short-term solution to a larger issue that needs to be addressed in a strategy that spans a decade. The Strategy and the Report should not only be focused on moving people into 'better jobs,' but also making 'worse jobs,' better.

In the Strategy and the Report, the only employment opportunities referred to as "better" are STEM careers. The NIWBG is not naive to the precarious, low-paid nature of jobs

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<sup>11</sup> Himmelweit, S. and J. De Henau. (2020). *A Care-led recovery from coronavirus*. ([Care-led-recovery-final.pdf \(wbg.org.uk\)](https://www.wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Care-led-recovery-final.pdf))

traditionally filled by women compared to jobs traditionally filled by men, which are typically more secure with better pay. While it is important to correct gender imbalances in STEM, pushing all women into those sectors is not a viable solution as:

- It does not address the barriers that keep women from entering those careers, ranging from gender stereotypes to availability of affordable childcare to digital poverty, particularly in rural areas.
- Not all women, men and gender minorities will want to enter STEM careers.
- Proper digital infrastructure (such as widespread access to reliable broadband) is needed to carry out many of the key proposals of the Strategy, which states that “basic digital literacy needs to be improved to address deepening social and economic inequalities.” Before improvement of digital literacy can begin, digital accessibility must be made widely available.
- By only focusing on STEM and digital sectors, the Department is not planning for a strong, diverse economy. If the standard of other sectors such as care, hospitality, and the public sector worsens due to lack of investment, it will not make for an attractive society for current and potential investors.

The NIWBG agrees with the Department that development of digital skills are important for all sectors, especially as our society moves towards a greater reliance on technology.

## **Gender Budgeting**

The NIWBG recognises and welcomes the Department’s efforts to address the under-representation of women in STEM through the establishment of a Women in STEM Action Plan. However, the NIWBG urges the Department, in meeting its Section 75 requirements, to apply gender analysis and impact assessment to the implementation of the Strategy and subsequent action plans attached to the Strategy and the Report. The application of such an approach to the Strategy would be constant, not only occurring during the evaluation periods 2, 5, and 10 years into the Strategy.

The use of gender budgeting tools, including analysis and assessment, can assist the Department in identifying systemic gender inequalities and support the development of budgets and policies that promote gender equality. Policy makers should be taking the gendered impacts of spending and revenue raising decisions into account and ensuring the use of mechanisms to bring about gender equality. Women’s intersecting identities will also be included in this analysis and policy makers implementing the Strategy are expected to promote these areas of equality as well.

A scoping study<sup>12</sup> commissioned by the Equality Commission considers how gender budgeting tools can be used in meeting Section 75 requirements and how the international models have useful application in Northern Ireland. Quinn concludes that applying impact assessment processes to mainstream gender equality is ‘...a worthwhile enterprise, both in terms of the recognised demand for a deeper application of the Section 75 duties to the budget process but also in terms of the wealth of methodologies associated with gender responsive budgeting which are adaptable to the Northern Ireland context’ and ‘vital [at] all levels of government ... as a means of fulfilling Section 75 duties.’

We recommend that gender budgeting expertise be incorporated into the implementation of the Strategy and other action plans to ensure that gender inequalities in the labour market and skills development are not exacerbated, but rather mitigated over the next decade. The NIWBG believes that gender budgeting is crucial to promoting gender equality and securing a caring and green economy.

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<sup>12</sup> Sheila Quinn (2013). Equality Responsive Budgeting ([Equality Responsive Budgeting \(equalityni.org\)](http://equalityni.org))