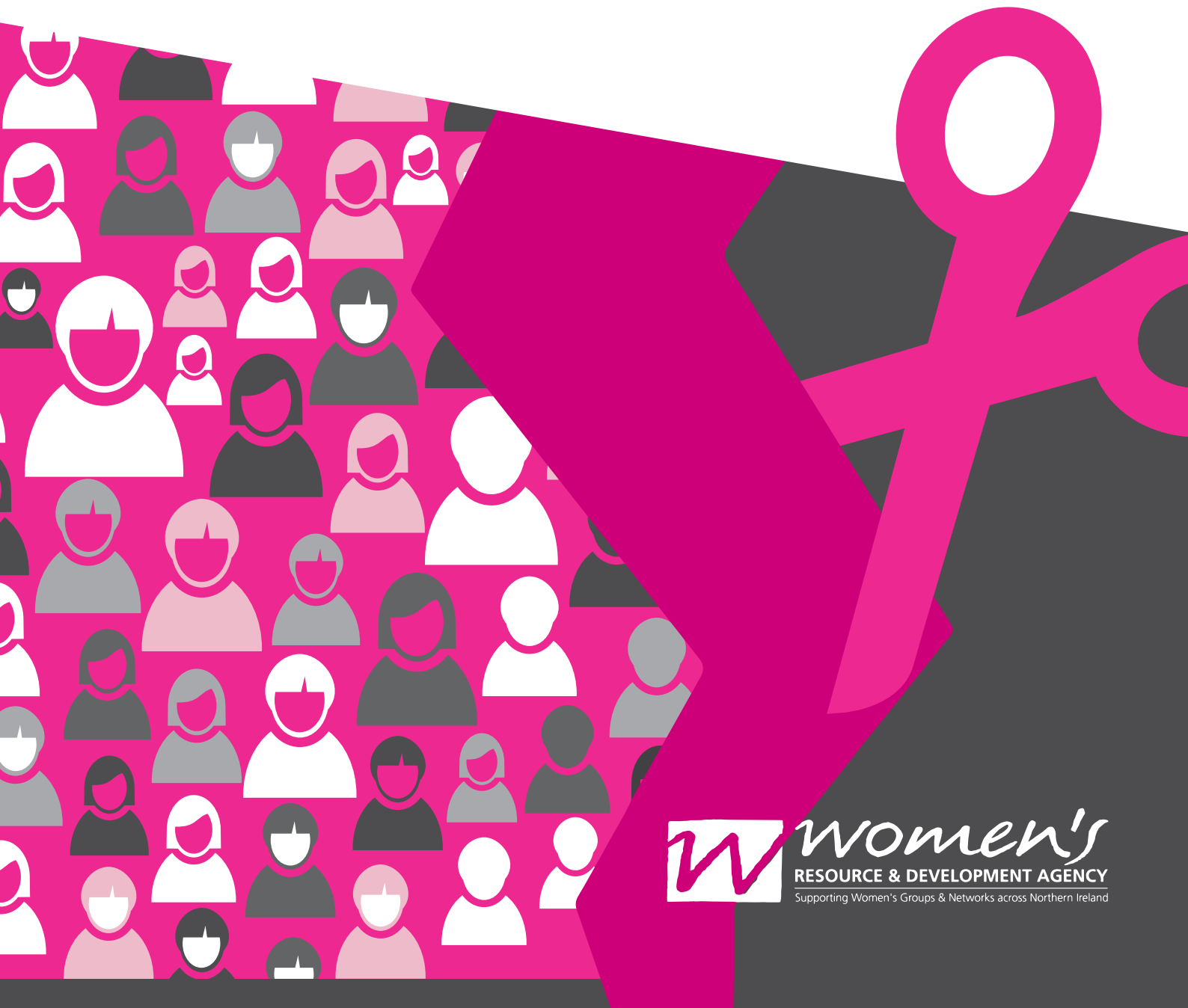


# Women at the Cutting Edge:

THE IMPACT OF SPENDING CUTS ON  
WOMEN'S COMMUNITY & VOLUNTARY  
ORGANISATIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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Women's Resource and Development Agency, 2016



*women's*  
RESOURCE & DEVELOPMENT AGENCY  
Supporting Women's Groups & Networks across Northern Ireland

# Acknowledgements

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) has been working with women and providing support to women's groups and networks across Northern Ireland since 1983. WRDA's vision is of a fair and equal society where women are empowered and are a visible force for change and influence in all areas of life.

Our mission, as a regional organisation, is to advance women's equality and participation in society. We work with women to achieve social, economic, political and cultural transformation. We engage across all traditions with women based in the most disadvantaged urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland.

Our work covers a wide scope and keeps us right at the heart of local communities. We are a membership organisation, existing for the benefit of our members, representing their interests and informing them of the latest issues affecting the women's sector. Our membership includes a wide range of local and international women's groups and organisations, as well as many individuals.

We gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance and support from our funders, particularly the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Department for Communities. We would also like to acknowledge and thank Ellen Finlay who carried out the initial work on this report and the women who gave of their valuable time to speak with us.



*In a time of global economic crisis, the value and expertise of women-only and women-centred organisations in shaping policy and service delivery is vital.*



(Women's Resource Centre 2011)

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# Executive Summary

Support services for women are under serious threat from funding cuts with many organisations reducing services, losing staff or closing altogether. The women's community and voluntary (CV) sector provides a range of services to women, children and families in some of the most disadvantaged areas<sup>1</sup> of Northern Ireland. The services are wide ranging to meet the often complex needs of women and include advice and advocacy services including for those suffering domestic violence, training and education for entering/re-entering employment, academic and vocational courses, capacity building, community leadership, health promotion, positive parenting and childcare.

The Women's Resource and Development Agency carried out this research to document how far the cuts have threatened the women's sector and the vital services provided by it. The information in this report was gathered through an online survey, face to face interviews and in-depth case studies. The survey was carried out anonymously so that no data, comment or information could be attributed to any of the participants. The material that has been gathered depicts a time of deep crisis for women in Northern Ireland, both in terms of the gendered impact of public sector cuts and austerity measures, and the specific impact of community and voluntary sector cuts on women-only services. It serves as a reminder of the amount of valuable work that is achieved by women's organisations in spite of a lack of financial commitment to this work by public funders. The analysis of the increased demand for services from women's organisations in the face of a worsening funding landscape begs the question, is the women's sector being adequately grant-aided or taken for granted?

## The report makes the following recommendations:



- » There should be a clear strategy to deliver on the public political commitments made to tackle the inequalities between women and men. The Executive should renew the Gender Equality Strategy with robust action plans containing responsibilities, budget allocations, outcomes, outputs, timeframes for delivery and key performance indicators.
- » In acknowledgement of the important role the women's sector plays in addressing the inequalities and barriers faced by women, Executive departments and other public bodies should engage in a partnership approach to identify pragmatic, high quality and cost effective solutions to improve the lives of women, their families and local communities.

<sup>1</sup> The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM) 2010 comprises seven domains of deprivation, each developed to measure a distinct form or type of deprivation; income, employment, health, education, proximity to services, living environment and crime.

- » Public funders should provide technical support on commissioning and service level agreements to women's organisations as a strategic part of ensuring their sustainability.
- » There should be a full equality impact assessment of all funding cuts, across all government departments, led by the Department of Finance. The Executive should identify proposals to address any inequalities highlighted and demonstrate its commitment to gender responsive budgeting.
- » The Women's CV sector should use broadcast, print and digital media to highlight the impact of the cuts to local services and to hold decision makers to account for those decisions.



The report was launched at a sector-wide women's conference hosted by Reclaim the Agenda<sup>2</sup> on 15th November 2016 during which women's sector representatives were invited to discuss the findings and recommendations and formulate key lobbying demands for government, decision makers and funders.

<sup>2</sup> Reclaim the Agenda is a collective of women sector representatives, grassroots feminist activists, trade union activists and interested individuals who campaign on 6 key themes; to live free from poverty, to live free from discrimination, to have healthcare services that meet our particular needs, to live our lives free from domestic and sexual violence and abuse, to live in a society where women are equally represented as decision maker, and to have access to good, affordable and flexible childcare provision.

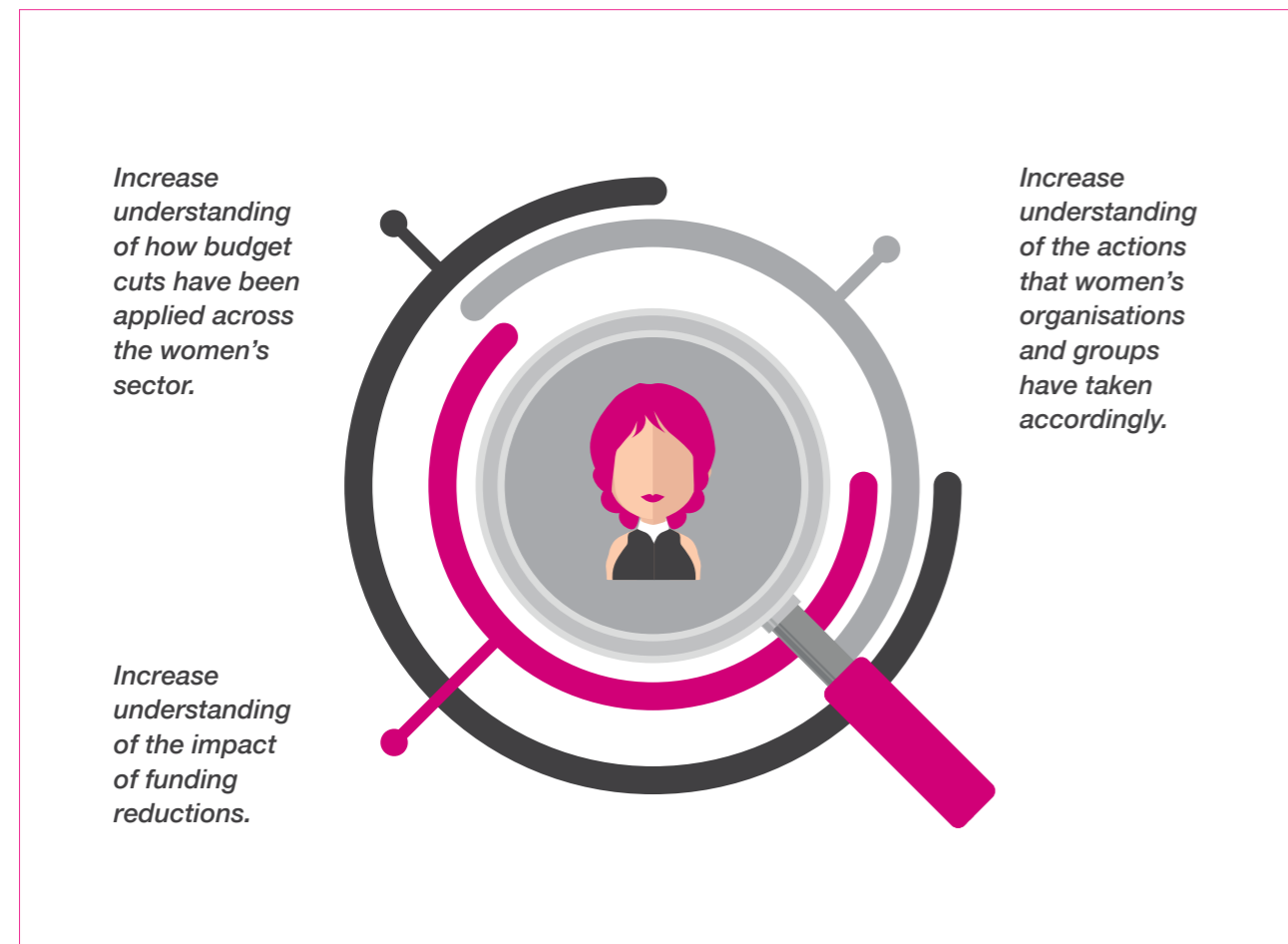
# Why?

## The Aim

The purpose of the research is to document the severe impact that recent funding decisions by Northern Ireland Executive Departments are having on women's organisations and groups in Northern Ireland. This report will provide an evidence base to support the activities of women's organisations that are speaking out to challenge budget cuts that are having a detrimental impact on vital women's services.

The information presented in this report aims to increase understanding of these three key issues:

- » How budget cuts have been applied across the women's sector.
- » The extent to which reductions in funding have impacted on the stability of women's organisations, the services that they provide and the experiences of women in disadvantaged communities.
- » The actions that women's organisations and groups have taken to mitigate the effects of changes to funding and their ability to provide services.



## The Context

Excessive cuts to the women's CV sector are not a new phenomenon. In 2009 the Northern Ireland Assembly carried the motion 'this Assembly expresses concern about the number of women's organisations that have been unable to secure funding to deliver services for the community; and calls on the Executive to initiate a cross cutting review to ensure (i) that the current mapping of the provision of services is adequate; (ii) the most effective use of resources to address the identified needs of the sector; and (iii) the equitable distribution of those resources..' (Hansard, 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb 2009).

Following that debate Junior Minister Jeffrey Donaldson undertook a review of government funding for women's groups and organisations with a report that was published in 2012. (OFMDFM, 2012) This report used GIS<sup>3</sup> mapping of government spend on women's groups as well as qualitative data obtained from interviews and discussions with women's groups and departmental officials. The findings illustrated the importance of investing in the women's CV sector and made some recommendations to both the sector and the departments that could improve access to funding as well as return on investment. It did not however address any issues related to the programme of deepening cuts to the women's sector that, by the time of its publication, were well underway.

## The Austerity Agenda

From 2010 the UK Government began implementing cuts to all public spending at an unprecedented level. Having provided £850 billion in support to the financial sector, the government undertook to recover these funds and reduce the budget deficit through a programme of austerity. The disproportionate impact of austerity on women has been extensively documented. (Rafferty, 2014).

The Fawcett Society has called the cumulative impact of social security reform and cuts to service provision 'a tipping point for women's equality' that is 'turning back the clock on women's rights' (Fawcett Society, 2012). Research by the Women's Resource and Development Agency in 2011 entitled *The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge* attempted to assess and highlight the experiences of women locally as a result of the recession. (WRDA, 2011).

It demonstrated that the Government's response to the financial crisis, including cuts to tax credits, the restructuring of benefits under a programme of welfare reform, and job losses and pay freezes in the public sector, would have a disproportionate effect on women. The Trade Union NIPSA estimated that 72.5% of the cuts would be shouldered by women 27.5% of the cuts would be faced by men. This analysis was based on the gender composition of the public sector workforce and women's increased reliance on public services, benefits and welfare, and CV sector support services. (NIPSA, 2011)

Based on data from the Institute of Fiscal Studies, NIPSA's report lists the following examples of reforms that are having more of an impact on women than men:

- » The abolition of the Health in Pregnancy Grant (non means-tested £190 payment to all pregnant women)

<sup>3</sup> A geographic information system (GIS) is a computer system for capturing, storing, checking, and displaying data related to positions on Earth's surface.

- » The removal of the Sure Start Maternity Grant for second and subsequent children (£500 paid to assist women on low incomes with the cost of a new baby)
- » The raft of reductions in tax credits
- » The freezing of child benefit
- » Caps on housing benefits, increased rates for social housing and cuts in expenditure on social housing
- » Lone parents (92% of whom are women) losing 18.5% of their net income
- » New medical assessment for Disability Living Allowance

Women also face poverty in retirement as they are more dependent than men on the state pension having fewer occupational or private pensions due to being more likely to have been engaged in low paid, low skilled part-time work. The UK Government has also accelerated plans to equalise the state pension age for women and men and raise both to 66 by 2020. This accelerated timeframe has a disproportionate impact on women and has been criticised by the cohort of women most severely affected for the lack of adequate notice provided to women nearing retirement.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, these conditions have led to many women's organisations and groups reporting an increase in demand for their services at the same time as the resources available to meet this growing need are shrinking. (WRC, 2010). Advice workers based at women's centres continue to report an increase in cases and difficulty closing cases as problems are ongoing, complex and compounded by multiple factors.

### **The Economic Policy of the NI Executive**

The budget cuts implemented by the Executive in 2015 followed a reduction of an estimated £600 million in the block grant for that financial year.<sup>5</sup> As Departments faced cuts to their own budgets these reductions were passed on to the CV sector in a manner that the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) called 'grossly disproportionate to the fiscal pressure Departments are under.' (NICVA, 2015) Through their Cuts Watch survey, NICVA documented the multiple reductions in funding to front line services delivered by the CV sector in areas such as early years education support, community arts projects, rural transport schemes, rehabilitation of ex-offenders, community women's centres, and youth development programmes. The additional loss of European Social Fund allocations administered by the Department of Employment and Learning led to a significant number of organisations facing possible closure of services.

Despite challenges from organisations in crisis across the CV sector, the Northern Ireland Executive continues to promote the narrative that these savage cuts are necessary due to the reduced block grant and the budget deficit of the UK government. While making the argument to the CV sector that

there is no alternative, Ministers have nonetheless approved unplanned spending that benefits other sectors within the Northern Ireland economy. In addition to spending over £1 million on press officers<sup>6</sup> since the 2015/16 budget was agreed by the Executive in January, further financial commitments have been made in the following areas:

- » **United Airlines:** Having already invested in United Airlines through Invest NI in 2005 in order to help the airline set up a Belfast – Newark flight, the Executive rushed through a decision to provide a £9 million bailout in August 2016. MLAs on the Public Accounts Committee have criticised the decision.<sup>7</sup>
- » **Derry City Airport:** Following the withdrawal of business from the Ryanair airline, the airport announced it would struggle to remain open. £7.5million assistance was immediately approved by the Executive in September 2016, despite the airport operating at a loss of over £2 million per year.<sup>8</sup>
- » **Corporation tax:** The 5 largest parties in the Assembly have been pursuing a reduced rate of corporation tax for Northern Ireland, to be devolved from HMRC. This is in spite of an admission in the Fresh Start Agreement that such a move will remove between £200-300 million in revenue from the Northern Ireland economy per annum, with a possible equivalent loss from the block grant.<sup>9</sup>

This disparity can be explained by the Executive's commitment to prioritise investment in the private sector that has dominated its economic policy since the publication of HM Treasury's paper *Rebalancing the Northern Ireland Economy* in 2010. Northern Ireland's Economic Strategy names this as its first priority and sets out the actions that Departments must take to promote private sector innovation and infrastructure as 'the NI economy has been dependent on the public sector for too long.' (NI Executive, 2012)

The benefits of investing to boost economic growth and prosperity are to be welcomed, particularly if the Executive prioritises socially responsible enterprises that will contribute to a fair and secure labour market and take an ethical approach to taxation. However, the current approach does not adequately reflect the importance of investing in communities and the public services necessary to tackle disadvantage and reduce economic inequality. It also reflects an incomplete understanding of what contributes to a sustainable economy as it ignores the unpaid work within families and communities that is mainly carried out by women. The Women's Budget Group estimates that unpaid work within households is equivalent to about 1/3 to 1/2 of GDP although it is not counted in and those carrying out this work are simply recorded as being 'economically inactive'. (WBG, 2015) Feminist economists argue that economic models that fail to address the unsustainability of systems of unpaid or low paid work, such as caring work, which women dominate are fundamentally flawed and therefore an unsuitable basis for economic policy. (SWBG, 2015)

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/northern-ireland-executive-press-officers-cost-public-1m-since-may-35143288.html>

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-37366264>; <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-37366264>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2016/09/19/news/foster-and-mcguinness-agree-7m-funding-for-derry-airport-699926/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nerinstitute.net/blog/2015/11/18/why-northern-ireland-needs-a-real-fresh-economic-s/>

<sup>4</sup> Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign. See: <http://www.waspi.co.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jun/16/northern-ireland-assembly-debates-budget-amid-cuts-standoff>

It is therefore obvious that investing in women’s CV organisations and groups should be a priority across all Executive Departments as they not only promote women’s equality and inclusion but also perform vital work supporting women in the economic and social responsibilities that they carry. Research has consistently demonstrated the benefits of providing the kind of women-only services which the women’s CV sector is best placed to facilitate. (Ward, 2008; WRC, 2011; WRDA, 2016). The evidence identifies key characteristics of the sector as being a safe and supportive environment, a holistic approach, addressing the education and childcare needs of women, providing high quality services to children and having a positive impact on the well-being of women, their families and communities.

Executive departments have expressed an understanding of the importance of funding the women’s CV sector and claim to be committed to supporting the work carried out by women’s organisations. For example;

- » **OFMDFM (2012):** Funding for women’s organisations is needed in order to ‘tackle barriers to women’s advancement’. Noting that ‘women from disadvantaged areas had particular needs that needed to be addressed so they could fulfil their potential.’ (OFMDFM, 2012)
- » **DSD / DARD Joint Policy Statement (2012):** Funding women’s CV organisations can ensure that, ‘women living in disadvantage in both urban and rural areas will be provided with the specialist support they require to enable them to tackle disadvantage and fulfil their potential in overcoming the barriers that give rise to their marginalisation, experience of poverty and exclusion.’

Despite these commitments however, the women’s sector is becoming increasingly unstable as Departments and their arms-length bodies reduce or remove funding streams that cut across the multiple strands of work carried out by women’s organisations. The cumulative impact of these cuts was highlighted in a motion passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly in May 2015 that stated;

‘This Assembly notes the important role of the community and voluntary sector across Northern Ireland in providing effective, efficient and value for money front-line services; accepts that, as a consequence of the 2015-16 Budget, decisions are being made by individual Executive Departments with no consideration of the impact on these services or the effect that they will have on the vulnerable in society; further notes that the ambiguity surrounding the European social fund has also forced many organisations to reduce their staff and their operations; and calls on the Executive to act in a coordinated manner to ensure that the sector and its organisations receive the required level of support and funding allocations. (Hansard, 2015)’

In proposing the motion North Antrim MLA Robin Swann from the Ulster Unionist Party summed up the debate concisely. “In closing, I have no doubt that the Assembly will agree with the motion; however, it is positive affirmation through actions that people want to see, not mere platitudes.” (Hansard, 2015) This paper presents evidence from women’s organisations that the actions of Executive Departments have not reflected the positive intention of the Assembly to protect valuable frontline services in the women’s sector.

## How?

### The Methodology

The first stage in producing this report was a desktop review of research undertaken by women’s organisations, trade unions and other CV sector bodies. The data from these sources has informed both the context to this study and the analysis of the findings.

Primary data was gathered through 3 mechanisms:



#### Online Survey:

Promoted to women’s organisations and groups through the ‘Women’s Link’ email network, 11 completed surveys returned.



#### Interviews:

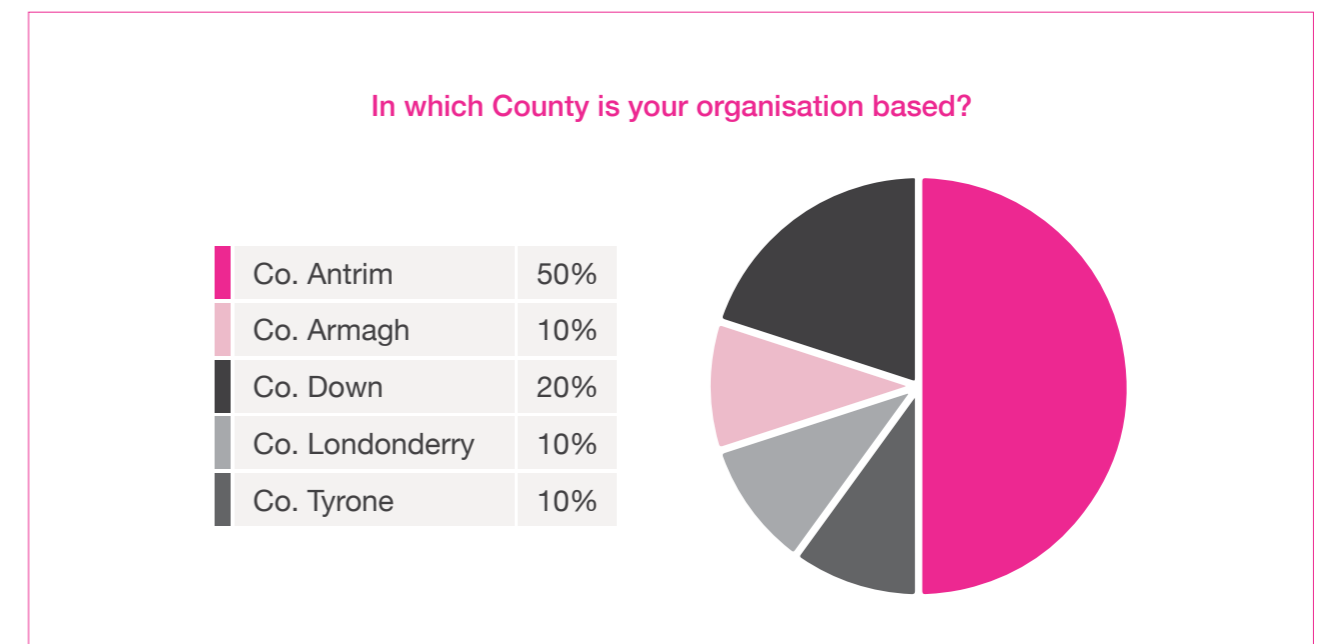
Semi-structured interviews with staff from 3 women’s organisations, all of which operate frontline services for women and children in areas of high deprivation.



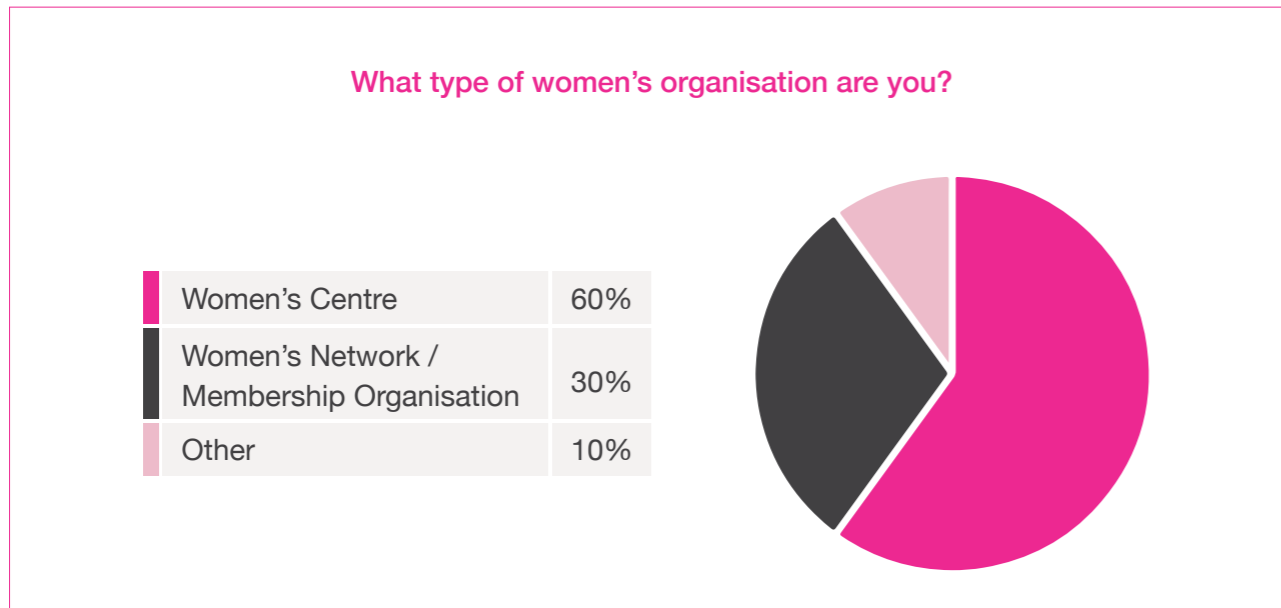
#### Case Studies:

A further 3 women’s organisations provided written case studies to illustrate in more detail their experience of the current funding landscape and its impact on their work.

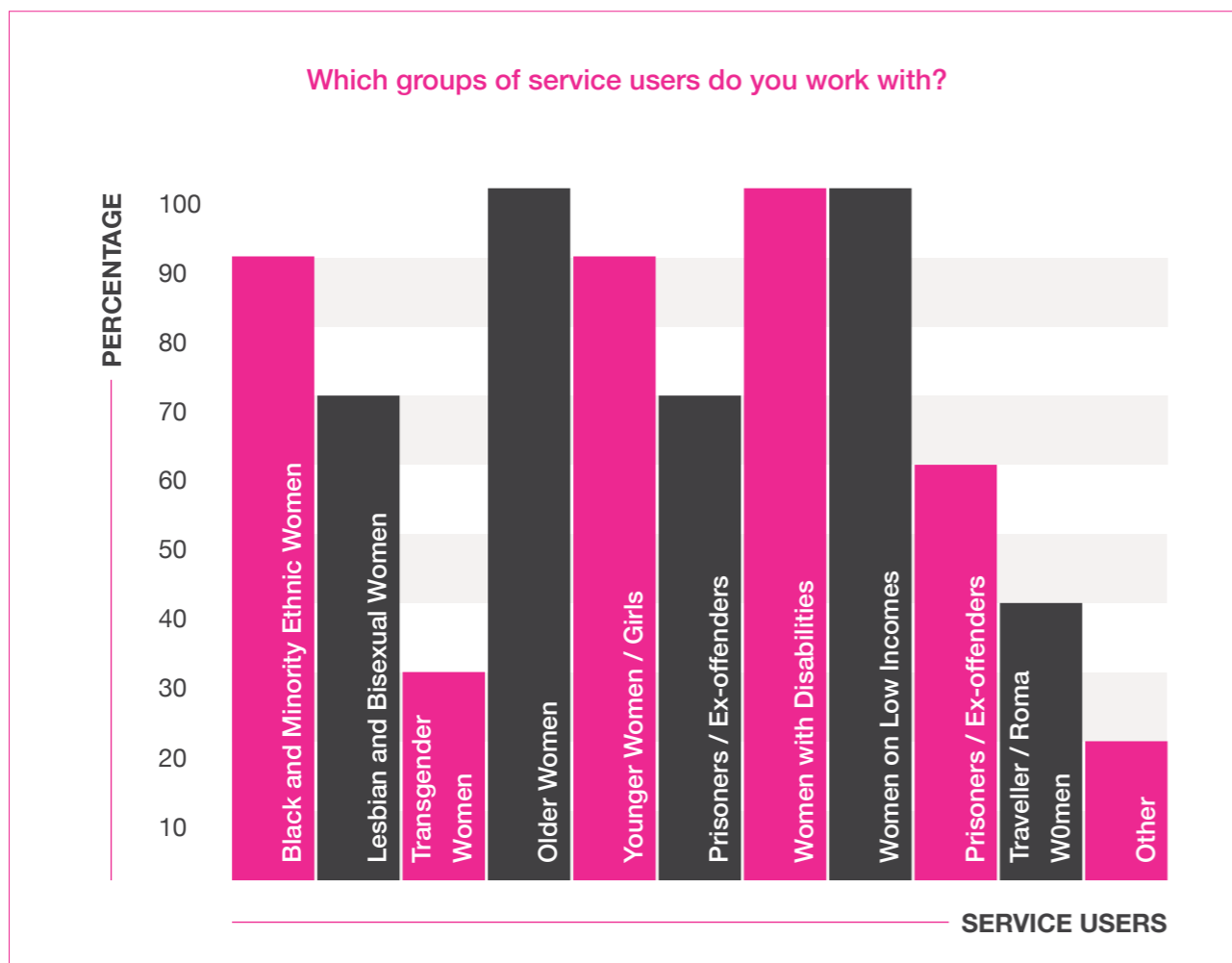
Breakdown of survey participants:



60% of respondents were community based women's centres and 30% were membership organisations or networks. 10% performed other roles.



In total, the 11 respondents to the survey delivered services annually to 21,482 women working with the following diverse range of service users:



## Case Study 1



A women's centre established in 1985 that provides the following services to the community:

- » Childcare
- » Education and Training Programmes
- » Essential Skills Support
- » Health and Well Being Courses
- » Family Support Services
- » Volunteering Opportunities
- » Drop-In Café
- » It is also recognised as a safe space for anyone suffering from domestic violence.

The centre operates with a dedicated staff team including three full time members of staff; a manager, a finance worker and the childcare manager. There are also two part-time practice leaders and two part-time childcare assistants supported by the board and a small team of volunteers.

Lack of funding remains one of the major difficulties facing the centre. A series of budget cuts over a number of years has led to operational costs for long-standing services and programmes being virtually non-existent. Every January for the past six years the staff have been put on protective notice due to the degree of financial insecurity and the ritual of awaiting funders' confirmation if funding is to continue. There has been no wage increase for 10 years for salaried staff. Funders do not fund cost of living increases and there is concern that when the minimum wage goes up the centre will have to cover it from other sources. Despite the precarious employment situation, staff turnover and sickness is very low. Staff members remain dedicated to the ethos and work of the centre.

## Childcare

The Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF) was introduced as a temporary emergency funding package, pending the implementation of a coordinated childcare strategy for Northern Ireland (still not published). It was established in April 2008 following on from the Children and Young People's fund as part of an emergency response by the Department of Social Development to ensure that key childcare services provided to disadvantaged women within their local areas were sustained. The fund supports 14 women's centres across the region at a cost of approximately £850,000 per annum. This is due to end in 2017 with no information currently available about how these services will be funded in the future, despite an overwhelmingly positive evaluation of the benefits of this fund and its value for money.<sup>10</sup>

The centre has 53 children registered and 56 on the waiting list and they currently offer 220 two-hour childcare sessions per week. The childcare staff have seen a dramatic rise in Special Educational Needs children and have required a Special Needs Support worker for over two years, but are unable to raise the finance for this. The shortfall in childcare salaries is raised through crèche fees (£2.50 for a 2 hr session) but some families cannot even afford to pay this small amount. It is therefore extremely difficult to accurately forecast cash flow. When the WCCF ends in 2017 the centre is extremely concerned for the women and children who access these vital services. Many women may come to the centre to access childcare and then engage with training and education and family support services. For example, the centre supported one young woman to work with social services to get her children back in her own care. She went on to become a volunteer women's mentor within the centre and is now completing training to head up the young women's programme.

## Training and Education

The training and education worker is part time and is funded by the centre through monies generated via room hire and crèche fees. She is employed on minimum wage, and often works voluntarily more than 24 hours because of the level of need. There are currently 12 courses running through a mainstream education provider but while the centre provides space and resources and maintains equipment etc., the education providers do not contribute any money towards running costs.

The centre is always looking for free courses and they have over 70 women a week accessing classes such as essential skills, relaxation and self-confidence. They also offer two NEETs programmes but these are limited to 16-24 year olds. There are so many success stories of individual women who have come in at their lowest ebb and have ended up getting really good jobs and in the process gaining self-confidence and resilience. The social return for the level of financial investment in this service is phenomenal.

<sup>10</sup> The WCCF offers good value for money considering the wide range of benefits delivered for a relatively modest cost per child per annum. (DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND DEPARTMENT FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT. EVALUATION OF REGIONAL SUPPORT ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR FINAL REPORT June 2015)

## Family Support

The centre lost their Family Support Worker three years ago due to funding cuts so this service is provided by the centre manager and volunteers. They provide one to one support for women and also do some advocacy work (accompanying women to courts and the GP) but given limited resources stretched to near breaking point, they are curtailed in what they can offer. The manager has representation on two support hubs where they can try and access help for women, but this referral process can take up to two months to get women help; some of whom are so vulnerable they have been on suicide watch. Staff members do what they can with the women in the interim. This summer they offered a holiday hunger food programme. They were acutely aware of the severe pressure families were under to feed the children when school was off and the breakfast club and free school meal facility was not available. This was highly successful feeding over 30 children per day for 4 weeks and again could not have happened without the support from board and volunteers.

## Board and Volunteers

The Centre could not operate without their dedicated board members and volunteers who help out on a daily basis. There are six core volunteers who provide vital services. They provide reception cover, the drop-in facility, cleaning of the centre, childcare cover, counselling two days per week, and social media that produces the monthly newsletter and keeps Facebook up to date. The Volunteers are managed by a volunteer board member. The volunteers do not receive expenses, but get a pamper hamper in June (volunteering Week) and a Christmas dinner.

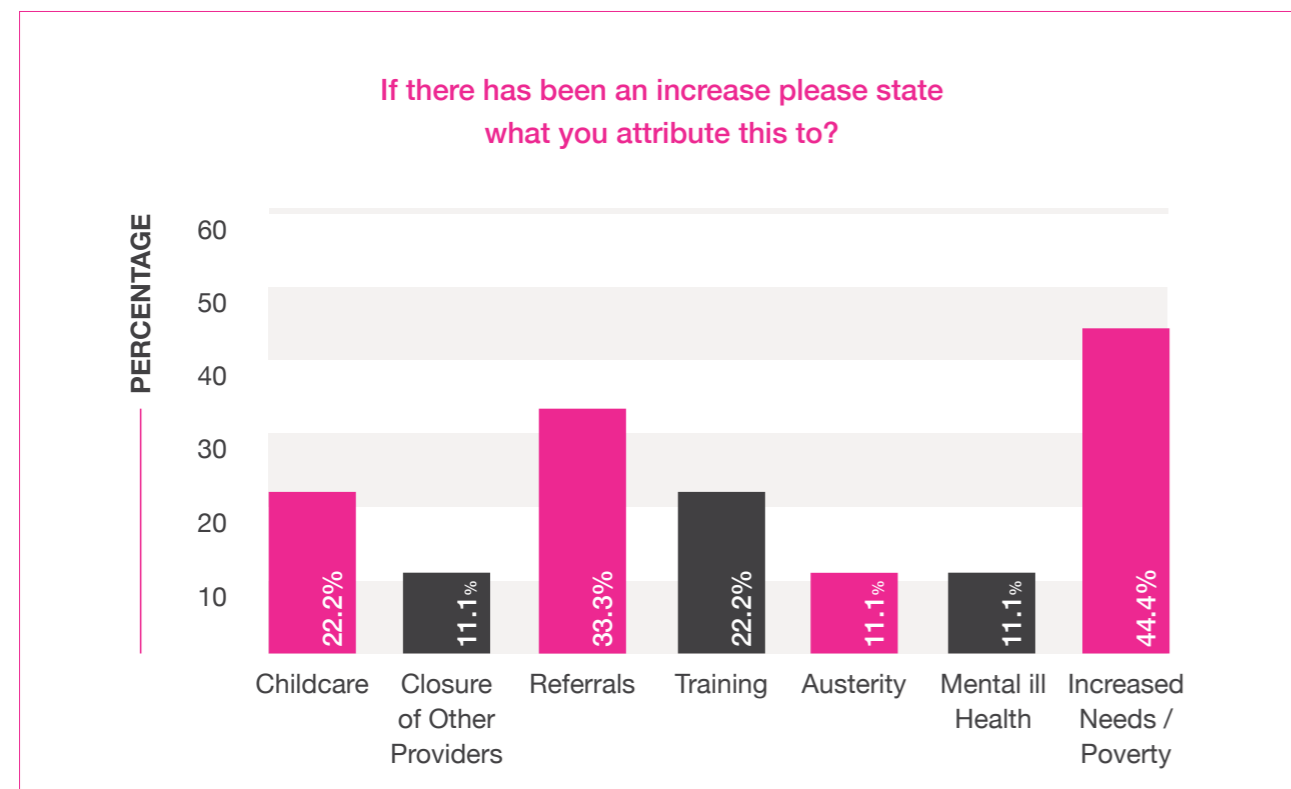
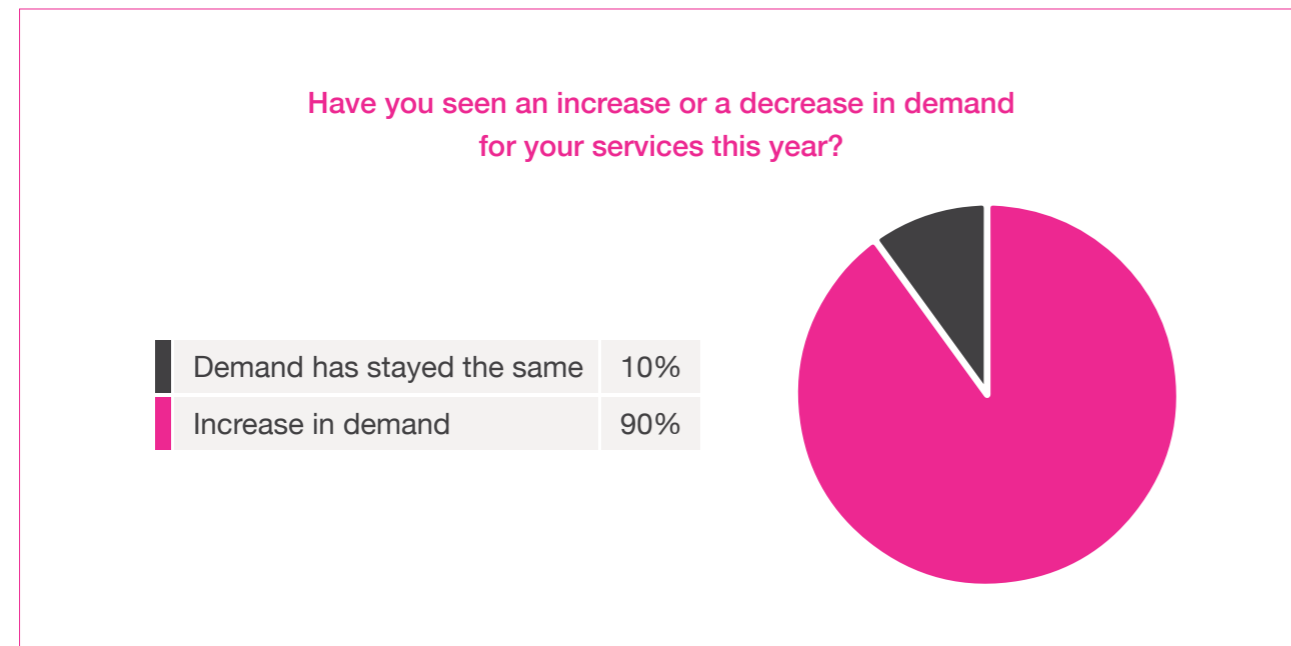
The centre has been constantly operating from hand to mouth and the manager is continuously juggling budget lines. She also goes around turning lights off and worrying about overheads as the funding doesn't cover these. She admits that the whole building could be turned over to childcare in order to maximise income. However the women's centre maintains its holistic, women-centred ethos that has existed since the women's group was originally set up. Childcare is an essential service and barrier to women's participation; it exists to allow women to engage in the other development opportunities that they offer in their training, education and support programmes.



# The Findings

## Pressure on Services

The vast majority of survey respondents reported an increase in demand for services in the last year. In their experience, the most prevalent reason for this increase is that women are facing increased financial need or poverty. Many also noted a higher number of referrals from statutory agencies as public sector services are cut back.



Consistently women’s CV organisations find themselves with shrinking resources and income yet the demand for their services continues to grow. Interviewees noted that the reduction in services by the statutory sector has put more pressure on women’s organisations to deliver at a time when their own programmes and services are under threat. Taking into account the complexity of women’s needs, the compound inequalities they face due to multiple identities and the increased accessibility that women-only services provide, interviewees raised the critical question of where else these women and children can go.

Having grown from a grassroots ethos and value base and wishing to retain that commitment to helping every woman who needs it, women’s organisations report feeling ethically compelled to assist women in whatever way they can:

*“Women’s needs come first, even if we no longer offer the service, we will do something for her, I mean what option do we have, we can’t turn her or her children away?”*

Participants also commented on how increased demand in the face of losing some workers has put unacceptable pressure and stress on the remaining staff. In order to meet the demand, workers are carrying out extra frontline roles as well as training and managing volunteers, looking for alternative funding sources, and completing funding applications.

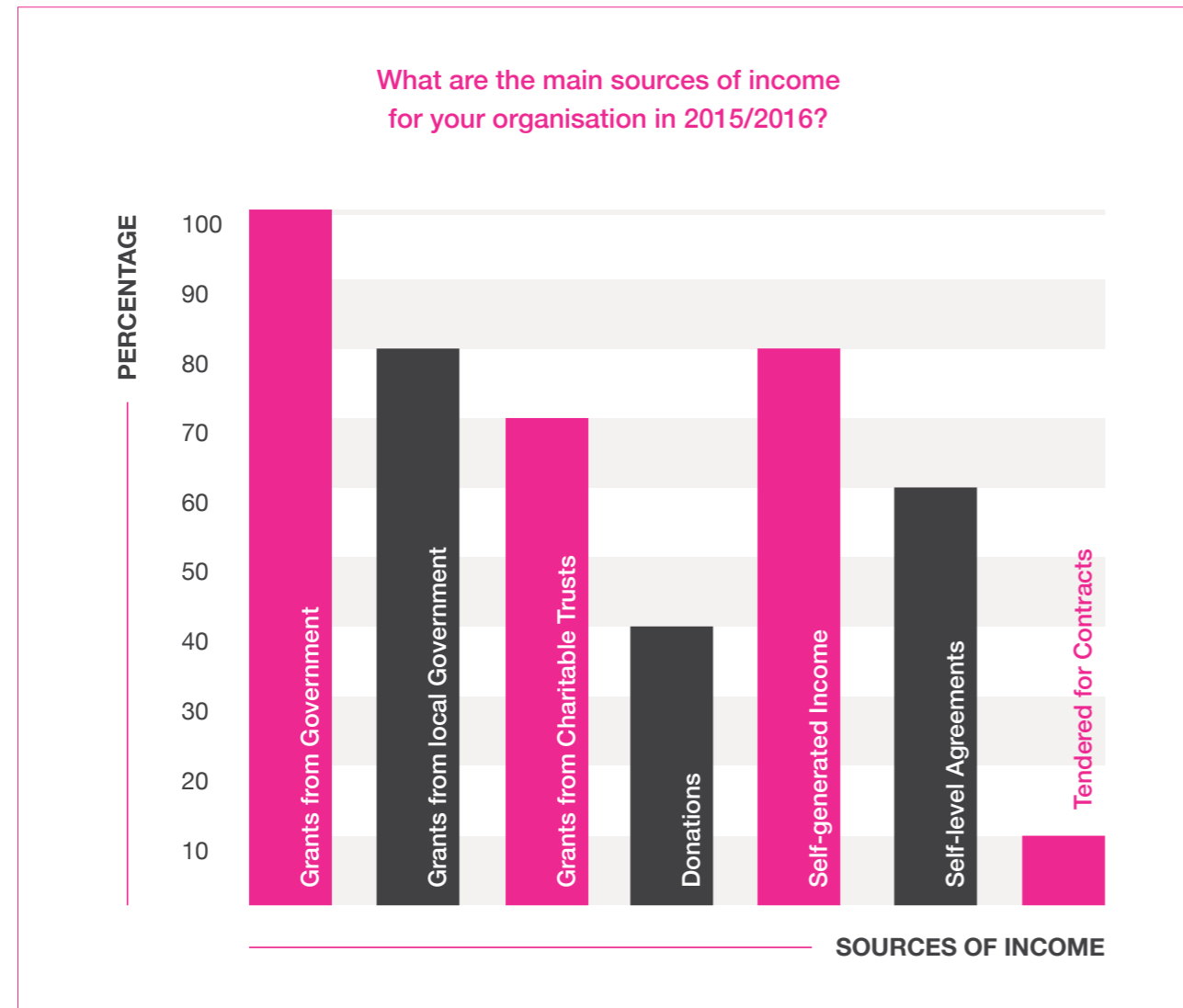
*“The impact is worse on staff as most service users don’t know about the funding situation at the moment as they are preparing for and taking their exams and we are trying to keep services up and running in whatever way we can.”*

Several of the organisations highlighted that while some of their services were no longer funded they were attempting to keep them operational by increasing their reliance on volunteers,

*“Several of our projects are being run by volunteers but that presents its own challenges and let’s face it you can only rely on volunteers for so long. We don’t want to be exploiting women volunteers as a cheap alternative to providing decent paid skilled employment.”*

## Lack of Strategic Oversight: The Cumulative Impact of Cuts

Women’s organisations commonly rely on a cocktail of funding from central and local government due to the holistic approach they take to working with women and the range of inequalities they are targeting. This includes inequalities in health, education, employment, safety, and outcomes for children; issues that straddle the work of most of the Executive Departments. All of the survey respondents reported that government grant aid was a key source of income for 2015/16 and 80% said that they were also reliant on local government grants. 60% received a significant part of their income from service level agreements to deliver vital services in partnership with statutory agencies.



It is no surprise then that interview participants reported a critical problem with a lack of joined-up thinking from statutory funders as the cumulative effect of budget cuts across all of these areas began to take effect.

All of the organisations who responded to the survey had lost funding in the last 12 months with two-thirds losing 25% or more. The interviewees stated they were finding it difficult to find alternative funding sources with one describing how they had started to charge a nominal fee for programmes.

*“This is the worst I have seen the funding situation for our sector in over 20 years.”*

*“As well as the funding cuts we are also dealing with all the usual problems and issues like gate-keepers in the area. It has made life even more difficult.”*

The budget passed by the NI Executive in January 2015 brought the first major wave of austerity measures to Northern Ireland with government departments required to cut around 10% of their budgets.<sup>11</sup>

The CV sector made representations to the First and deputy First Minister through NICVA to address the way in which these cuts were being passed on to CV organisations. As already discussed in this report, NICVA expressed anger that cutting external grant support was being pursued as an ‘easy option’ as it required little notice and carried ‘no staffing or redundancy consequences for Ministers.’ NICVA also raised the issue of multiple cuts and reported the following commitment:

*“The First and deputy First Ministers gave commitments to ensure an overview was taken of the dangers of unintended consequences of individual departments making cuts that had a cumulative disproportionate impact on voluntary and community groups. Martin McGuinness also said OFMdfM Minister Jennifer McCann would take responsibility for that oversight with Sinn Fein ministers and liaise with the community and voluntary sector.”<sup>12</sup>*

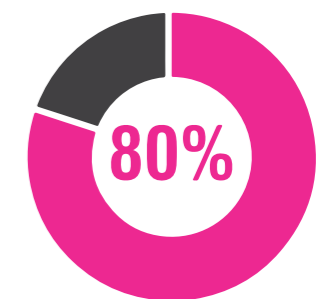
The women’s CV sector’s experience of how funding cuts have subsequently been managed does not reflect this and participants felt that women’s organisations have been particularly susceptible to these ‘unintended consequences’ due to the plethora of cross-cutting services they deliver. This lack of strategic oversight was very much felt by the interviewees who expressed frustration with the way funding decisions had been made and the instability they now face as a result. **80% of survey respondents reported having challenged funders due to the substantial impact that decisions were having on their ability to carry out their core services.**

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/a40aa234-c0f6-11e4-88ca-00144feab7de>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.nicva.org/article/northern-ireland-executive-discuss-sector-cuts>

**100%**  
of responders  
had funding  
**REDUCED**

**2/3 LOST 25%  
OR MORE**



**80% of survey respondents reported having challenged funders due to the substantial impact that decisions were having on their ability to carry out their core services.**

Moreover, interviewees reiterated that the women's CV sector has always faced a lack of real commitment from Government to addressing the inequalities women face and a lack of appreciation for the high value for money received from investing in the work carried out by women's organisations. Women's sector organisations operate on relatively small budgets and provide social value that far exceeds their capacity. For example, the Women's Support Network reported in 2011 that a project run by Shankill Women's Centre provided a social return of £3 for every £1 invested. (WSN, 2011) As noted in Case Study 1, the independent evaluation of the Women's Centres Childcare Fund undertaken by the Departments for Social Development, and Agriculture and Rural Development, reported an overwhelmingly positive assessment of the benefits achieved by the women's centres managing this fund. It considered the multiple social benefits to parents, particularly mothers, and to children and concluded that it represented good value for money. (DSD/DARD, 2012)

Participants also discussed the fact that the 2015 cuts came when organisations were still trying to recover from one of the most challenging funding decisions for the women's sector in recent years in relation to the allocation of training and education budgets under the European Social Fund. The decision by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to severely limit the training qualifications that a women's organisation could offer drastically restricted the capacity for women's organisations to adequately resource their training programmes. Many had no choice but to make education and training workers redundant. The rationale for this decision could be connected to cuts in the Further and Higher Education sector as it provides an opportunity for DEL to reroute money and push women's education back into the formal sector. The reasons why women are more able to access education in community based women-only services have already been discussed in this paper and outlined in recent research. (WRDA, 2016) Again this decision demonstrates the funder's lack of appreciation for the role played by women's organisations in tackling inequality and disadvantage within our communities.

## Mitigations and Sustainability

### The Impact of Funding Cuts



**40%**  
of responders had to  
make **REDUNDANCIES**  
or **REDUCE**  
staff hours



**30%**  
of responders  
had **CLOSED**  
**SERVICES**



**30%**  
of responders  
carried out **LESS**  
**LOBBYING** and  
**CAMPAIGNING**

In order to mitigate the funding cuts organisations have adopted a number of strategies. Of those who completed the survey 40% have made staff redundant, 40% have had to cut staff hours and 30% have closed some services. 20% used other methods to deal with the situation such as using volunteers.

A number of women's organisations have also worked hard to expand their potential to generate income through social economy enterprises with 80% of survey respondents stating that some of their income was self-generated. While this allows for some freedom from the uncertainty of grant aid, participants also noted that it does not produce enough income to ensure full sustainability without government support.

*"We had to change the way we think, we had to start thinking like a business, we have to continually develop but we will never be 100% self-sustaining, that just isn't possible, which is why we need government funding. After all we are saving them [the government] money in the long run."*

In spite of the range of actions taken by organisations to respond to the growing demand for their services and mitigate the impact of budget cuts, many are concerned for their survival. Whilst 70% of survey respondents remain confident or very confident that they will be here in 12 months, this drops to only 40% when asked about their projections for the next 3 years. 10% report feeling 'not confident at all' that their organisation will survive for that duration.

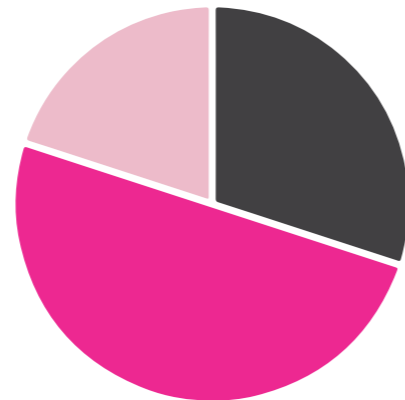


## Case Study 2



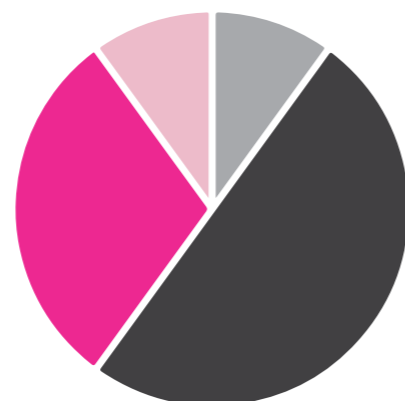
How confident are you that your organisation will be here in 12 months' time?

Very confident	50%
Confident	20%
Not sure	30%



How confident are you that your organisation will be here in 3 years' time?

Very confident	10%
Confident	30%
Not sure	50%
Not confident at all	10%



This is a worrying trend for staff, service users and communities. It will inevitably put pressure back on to statutory services who are already signposting users to the women's sector due to public spending cuts and the austerity agenda. If these services are lost, so also will be the knowledge, expertise, experience and community relationships that women's organisations are characterised by. The issues that afflict areas will grow and women and families who currently rely on women's organisations will be at the mercy of private sector providers many of whom have been criticised for their profit-driven approach to dealing with vulnerable people.<sup>13</sup> The gaps left by women's organisations are also being filled by groups that are religiously motivated which can present barriers for women who find their value base or ethos inaccessible.

<sup>13</sup> For example; Now troubled children are an investment opportunity, Polly Toynbee. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/13/troubled-children-investment-extreme-britain-outsourcing-care> and HMRC to take over work of tax credits firm Concentrix, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/20/concentrix-hmrc-work-tax-credits-stripped-away-firm-contract-treasury>

A service delivery and advocacy organisation established in 1978 as a voice for lone parents that relied heavily on government funding for the past 38 years. Previously with bases in Belfast, Derry and Ballymena, the organisation has recently been forced to close due to funding losses. Whilst not a women-only organisation, with 92% of lone parents in Northern Ireland being women, this organisation primarily dealt with women as service users.

### Education and Training

They provided employability training programmes for single parents with Level 2 or above qualifications, including work placements and a financial contribution to childcare. They had a 35% success rate of participants gaining employment on completion, and in an average year would have had 60-100 lone parents engaged in programmes from across Northern Ireland. The training and placements as well as the childcare were all sourced as locally as possible in order to make them accessible. Their focus specifically was on up-skilling parents so that they could become financially independent.

When the rules changed that training funded by the European Social Fund could only be for qualifications at Level 1 or below, this had a detrimental impact on the organisation as this was not what was required by the parents in order for them to secure employment. As with many other providers of community education, this service was effectively decimated as the funding was re-routed to the Colleges of Further and Higher Education. This had a massive impact on the organisation's staffing resources as they had to be cut from 15 workers down to 7.

## Cuts to Core Funding

The organisation did have a cocktail of funding but found that in some ways this was more difficult to deliver on as different funders were funding different bits of services and no-one was funding a whole programme. When the DHSSPS proposed a significant cut to core funding and ultimately withdrew it completely, this meant that the organisation's advocacy role was severely compromised and undermined the organisations ability to attract additional funding to deliver services. This compounded an already crisis situation. A further huge cut to their core funding of 25% from the Department of Social Development had a particularly detrimental impact on their Derry operation which subsequently had to close. The organisation had a small social enterprise trading arm which has continued so that the liquidation can be completed, and the Director was able to signpost lone parents on to other organisations and training providers. By summer 2016 the organisation was still receiving over 200 enquires from lone parents and was signposting people to Citizens Advice Bureau, Advice NI and other training providers.

## Funders Respect for Accessible Service Delivery

Two government Departments owed the organisation large sums of money for the delivery of services, some of which were never paid for. One department disallowed childcare payments because they did not go to a registered childminder; which in rural areas is nearly impossible to find and would not present the most cost effective option. (e.g. the difference between a nominal fee of £10 as paid to a family friend versus a registered childminder at £25) The other department held back on the letter of offer and then said that the organisation did not fulfil their contract even though they had delivered ¾ of it and met all the targets and outcomes. The unwillingness of those departments to resolve these issues led to significant cash flow problems and ultimately forced the organisation to close. The Board of Directors of the organisation were all lone parents themselves and were frightened by the financial consequences they could face personally if the situation worsened. The experience of the Director suggests that a lack of respect for community education, accessible programmes and the holistic approach taken by the organisation played a large part in the funding decisions of sponsor departments. The organisation maintained a commitment to supporting people (primarily women) to access training, work placements and childcare in a way that would be most effective for them as lone parents and the organisation suffered for these principles.

## Conclusion

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*“In many ways, the women's sector is a model of the Big Society we wish to build. That is a society in which we all work together to address problems, conscious that government has a role to play but that it does not have all the answers, and recognising the role played by charities, voluntary groups and others alongside central and local government. You are way ahead of us with this. The support services you provide and have been providing for over 35 years are invaluable to so many-thank you for all that you do.”<sup>13</sup>*

Prime Minister Theresa May (speaking in 2010)



<sup>13</sup> May, Theresa (2010) Speech to the 36th Annual Women's Aid Conference

It is evident that the women's CV sector makes a huge contribution to addressing the needs of women, children and their families. Community based women's centres and other specialist women's services contain decades of knowledge and experience and are best placed to engage with vulnerable or disadvantaged women. Women's organisations work to further empower women, increase their access to opportunities and improve women's confidence, while also addressing the external barriers to equality and inclusion that women in our society still face. They facilitate Government in the delivery of cost effective positive outcomes for addressing inequality and disadvantage by providing a range of social and economic benefits through their services. Women's organisations support women whose lives and opportunities have been shaped by the unpaid work and undervalued roles they undertake that provide the social backbone of the Northern Ireland economy. The women's sector has heard many verbal commitments from government that their work with women is valued but are frustrated at the disparity between words and actions.

As public sector service providers face growing pressure due to budget cuts and staff losses their reliance on the women's sector has increased. By working in partnership with public bodies the women's sector can contribute their experience, proven track record, local knowledge and community trust in order to deliver the best outcomes for women. However, with organisations' resources being cut beyond the levels that allow them to effectively meet all the needs they are presented with, the sector is not prepared to be taken advantage of.

This report has demonstrated the extent to which the women's CV sector has been destabilised due to the current funding climate. It also reiterates existing evidence that women are disproportionately affected by cuts to the public sector and other actions taken under the austerity agenda. Evidence has been presented that undermines the Executive's narrative that there is not enough money to fund vital CV services as examples of spending decisions suggest an approach driven more by economic policy than necessity.

The women's sector is seeking action from the Executive to tackle the current funding crisis urgently and build strategic investment in the sector and in the partnerships that women's organisations have with statutory agencies. While women's organisations continue to innovate and work hard to improve their sustainability, they cannot do this without a baseline of reliable support from the Executive and local government.

*"We know Government won't fund us 100%, but we do need core services to be funded. We don't stagnate, we continually develop, so why can't Government support us?"*

As the Northern Ireland Executive nears the end of its 10 year Gender Equality Strategy, the women's sector hopes to see a renewed commitment to achieving real improvement in women's lives and their position in society. It is vital that women's organisations are protected to ensure that positive gender equality outcomes are for all women in our society, including the most vulnerable and marginalised.



## Recommendations

- » There should be a clear strategy to deliver on the public political commitments made to tackle the inequalities between women and men. The Executive should renew the Gender Equality Strategy with robust action plans containing responsibilities, budget allocations, outcomes, outputs, timeframes for delivery and key performance indicators.
- » In acknowledgement of the important role the women's sector plays in addressing the inequalities and barriers faced by women, Executive departments and other public bodies should engage in a partnership approach to identify pragmatic, high quality and cost effective solutions to improve the lives of women, their families and local communities.
- » Public funders should provide technical support on commissioning and service level agreements to women's organisations as a strategic part of ensuring their sustainability.
- » There should be a full equality impact assessment of all funding cuts, across all government departments, led by the Department of Finance. The Executive should identify proposals to address any inequalities highlighted and demonstrate its commitment to gender responsive budgeting.
- » The Women's CV sector should use broadcast, print and digital media to highlight the impact of the cuts to local services and to hold decision makers to account for those decisions.



## Case Study 3

A women's centre established in 1987 that provides the following services to the community:

- » Childcare
- » Shared learning Education and Training
- » Health and Well Being Projects
- » Women's networking project
- » Culture and Diversity Projects
- » Drop-In Café

The Women's Centre operates with a dedicated core staff team. There are also 3 full time project managers and 7 childcare workers supported by the Board and a small team of volunteers.

### Service Cuts

In 2016 due to the restrictions placed on the European Social Fund (ESF) the centre lost 5 staff out of 30;

- » 1 childcare worker
- » 1 education manager
- » 1 learner support worker
- » 1 employability worker
- » 1 administrator

As ESF funding is limited to a maximum of 65% of overall programme costs, organisations are required to generate the remaining amount in 'match funding'. The centre was able to carry the match funding in the previous financial year but couldn't do it this year due to depleted reserves.

### Resilience

Without the ESF money administered by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), they had to piece together small amounts of money to run their

education programmes and this has been co-ordinated through a volunteer Board member as they no longer employ an education team. The Centre is still experiencing a high demand with women doing courses. They are a registered education centre and brought in their own tutors to run GCSE programmes and ECDL programmes. Because they no longer receive DEL funding there are no restrictions on students, so for example they can be working or unemployed, they don't have to be in the 'Not in Education Employment or Training (NEETS)' category and they are not restricted by age. The loss of this funding did open up some new opportunities for how they work and also reduced bureaucracy in terms of monitoring and evaluation. A considerable amount of staff time had previously been spent filling in forms for ESF and accounting for students.

They also bring in a sessional counsellor and an advice and guidance worker from a joint project throughout North Belfast who attends the centre one day a week seeing clients by appointment. They have been able to access small grants from statutory bodies like the Public Health Agency and other funders to sustain this work.

Belfast Regeneration Office and Belfast Trust funds the centre's core costs and the project budgets that were impacted through funding cuts were topped up out of reserves they had built up. However when it comes to pensions or pay increases for staff, these are never factored in by funders so it is left to the Centre to find the difference and workers have received no pay rises for over 10 years. There have been no cost of living increases either.

The Centre also lost Lottery funding for their young women's project which meant the loss of 1 full time manager, 2 full time workers and 3 part-time workers who went out into schools. This project directly tackled the issue of teenage pregnancy which the skilled workers were able to do in a very sensitive way and add value to the curriculum. The loss of this work has removed a vital resource from local schools and impacted the accessibility of sexual health education for young women.

### Increase in Demand

There is no doubt that statutory agencies are signposting more women to the centre despite the cuts in the services they can offer. The Jobs and Benefits Office are sending increasing numbers of women to them. Having lost the full time advice worker because funding was cut, women currently have limited access to the sessional advice worker. Not being able to offer full support to women means they are more likely to disengage with the services.

The centre used to be able to offer advocacy but with the staff cuts that's nearly impossible to do now and women still need accompanied to courts or police stations or the local GP. The centre has also been approached by a group called 'Christians Against Poverty' who want to offer advice and guidance to some of our women. They have said they will just ask the women can they say a prayer with them before they offer advice.

The centre manager is extremely concerned about what looks like a 'Green and Orange' carve up of groups, centres and organisations and has raised concerns about what happens to groups or centres that do not fit into either box. Once the Belfast Regeneration Office monies go and core funding becomes a function of Belfast City Council they think that they will be safe as they have a good relationship with their local councillors but would be concerned about other groups who don't.

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