



# **Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas**

## **Brexit: Women's Perspectives**

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## Acknowledgements

This research has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which was set up with funding from the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland (hereafter, DSD) and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland (hereafter, DARD).<sup>1</sup>

The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion. The seven groups are as follows.

- Training for Women Network (TWN) - Project Lead
- Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- Women's Support Network (WSN)
- Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- Women's Tec
- Women's Centre Derry
- Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium ensures that there is a continuous two-way flow of information between government and the sector. It ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these

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<sup>1</sup> The remaining paragraphs in this section represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisations.

views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately result in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

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## Executive summary

Following the referendum on the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union ('Brexit'), commentators have grappled with the vexed question of what withdrawal might actually entail for the former, addressing the complexity of what is at stake in this debate in terms of disentanglement from the union after decades of multidimensional - i.e. economic-normative-political-legislative-regulatory - integration. This commentator endeavour has lent useful insight into the potential implications of Brexit for Northern Ireland and gender equality. Building on that insight, this brief paper will explore the perspectives on Brexit of a cohort of women living and working in disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland (particularly their perspectives on the representation of Northern Ireland's interests and women's interests in negotiations on the withdrawal agreement and the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union).

It, of course, remains the case that profound uncertainty abounds as to the likely nature and implications, whether at the level of the economic or beyond, of (a) any such withdrawal agreement and future relationship; (b) any potential transitional deal (to cover the period between withdrawal and the establishment of that relationship); and, (c) any future trade deals between the United Kingdom and third countries (non-member states of the European Union).<sup>2</sup> This uncertainty is compounded by ambiguity in the United Kingdom government's Brexit negotiating position.<sup>3</sup>

In addressing such uncertainty and ambiguity, commentators have sought to delineate the potential aggregate consequences of Brexit for the United Kingdom, mapping projections and permutations based on the extent to which withdrawal may

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<sup>2</sup> This includes uncertainty over whether a comprehensive free trade deal – a stated United Kingdom government negotiating objective - is achievable, or whether a so-called 'no-deal' scenario is a feasible option, as has been mooted by government.

<sup>3</sup> As manifest in well-documented ministerial disagreement over substantive negotiating issues. On this, see, for example, J. Elgot, 'No 10 contradicts Hammond over 'off the shelf' Brexit transition deal', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2017. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jul/31/no-10-rejects-off-the-shelf-transitional-deal-for-brexit>. See also, A. Asthana, 'Hammond and Fox are not on the same Brexit page', *The Guardian*, 30 July 2017. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jul/30/hammond-and-fox-are-not-on-the-same-brexit-page>. Finally, see A. Asthana, 'Tensions flare in cabinet over post-Brexit free movement', *The Guardian*, 30 July 2017. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jul/30/tensions-flare-in-cabinet-over-post-brexit-free-movement>.

or may not possibly result in substantive change or risk to an economic-normative-political-legislative-regulatory status quo fundamentally shaped by over four decades of integration within the union.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of projected structural impact, the 'all-but-unanimous' view of economists is that withdrawal will 'deeply damage' the United Kingdom economy;<sup>5</sup> where economists tend to disagree is on the question of the likely extent of that damage:

analysis from the Bank of England to the OECD to academia has all concluded that Brexit would make us economically worse off. *The disagreement is mainly over the degree of impoverishment.*<sup>6</sup>

It has been suggested that government efforts to fiscally adjust for any such damage in tax and spending policy could mean that the 'burden of Brexit would fall more heavily'<sup>7</sup> on benefit and tax credit recipients in low-income households.<sup>8</sup> On this view, Brexit could significantly aggravate pre-existing inequality and vulnerability.

Of course, Brexit uncertainty has already adversely impacted the United Kingdom economy, as manifest in a substantial post-referendum depreciation in sterling correlated with higher inflation and, in turn, inter alia, increased debt interest on government borrowing as well as declines in real wage growth, consumer spending, living standards and business investment.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This work encompasses projections of significant risk to, inter alia, economic growth, trade and investment, living standards, industry and agriculture, higher education, labour supply, food security, regulatory standards, rights and equality protections. The question of implications is, of course, subject to competing theoretical perspectives.

<sup>5</sup> B. Eichengreen, 'The experts strike back! How economists are being proved right on Brexit'. *The Guardian*, 10 August 2017. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/aug/10/experts-strike-back-how-economists-proved-right-on-brexit>.

<sup>6</sup> T. Sampson et al. 'The economists for Brexit predictions are inconsistent with the basic facts of international trade', London School of Economics, London: 2017. [Online]. Available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2017/08/23/economists-for-brexit-predictions-are-inconsistent-with-basic-facts-of-international-trade/>.

<sup>7</sup> I. Begg and F. Mushövel, 'The economic impact of Brexit: jobs, growth and the public finances', London School of Economics: London, 2016. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/europeanInstitute/LSE-Commission/Hearing-11---The-impact-of-Brexit-on-jobs-and-economic-growth-summary.pdf>. See also,

<sup>8</sup> A. Armstrong et al. 'The EU referendum and fiscal impact on low-income households', National Institute of Economic and Social Research, London: 2016.

<sup>9</sup> See D. Blanchflower, 'Britain is fast becoming the sick man of Europe - experts debate Brexit data', *The Guardian*, 24 July 2017. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/jul/24/britain-is-fast-becoming-the-sick-man-of-europe-experts-debate-brexit-data>. See also, D. Blanchflower, 'Workers are being punished by Brexit', *The Guardian*, 25 May 2017. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/may/25/workers-brexit-data-bank-of-england-wages>.

This debate also encompasses projections of variegated Brexit risk for Northern Ireland.<sup>10</sup> The latter includes potential risk to political stability and possible ‘serious’ adverse economic ramifications associated with the imposition of restrictions on the free movement of people and goods between the jurisdiction and the Republic of Ireland.<sup>11</sup> While the pro-Brexit lobby might associate withdrawal with supposed economic opportunities for Northern Ireland, *[t]he evidence suggests that the risks to the Northern Ireland economy posed by Brexit probably outweigh the opportunities*.<sup>12</sup> Some sectors are categorised as at particular risk. The latter includes the agricultural sector, deemed ‘unviable’ without replacement funding from government to compensate for loss of European Union farm subsidy.<sup>13</sup> Such substantive issues have been relied upon to justify a case for special consideration of the Irish question in Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations.<sup>14</sup>

As noted, commentators have also endeavoured to map the potential gendered effects of Brexit. In so doing, they have taken account of the reality that membership of the union has fundamentally assisted the advancement of women’s rights and equality in the United Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> This work identifies potential risk posed by withdrawal to respect for these norms, particularly working women’s rights.<sup>16</sup> That risk has been partly associated with the prospect of government easing the regulatory burden on business to boost economic growth in the advent of a forecast

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, House of Lords European Union Committee, ‘Brexit: UK-Irish relations’, 6th Report of Session 2016-17, HL Paper 76, House of Lords: London, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17. For an ‘economists’ for Brexit’ view on supposed post-Brexit economic opportunities for the United Kingdom as a whole, see Economists for Brexit, ‘The economy after Brexit’. [Online]. Available at:

[http://issuu.com/efbkl/docs/economists\\_for\\_brexit\\_the\\_economy/1?e=24629146/35248609](http://issuu.com/efbkl/docs/economists_for_brexit_the_economy/1?e=24629146/35248609). For a thoroughgoing critique of this view, see Sampson et al., *op. cit.*, which elaborates on how ‘the economists for Brexit predictions are *inconsistent with the basic facts of international trade*’.

<sup>13</sup> House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, ‘Northern Ireland and the EU referendum’, First Special Report of Session 2016–17, HC 48. House of Commons: London, 2016, p.25.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, House of Lords European Union Committee, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> R. Guerrina, ‘Exiting the EU? Opportunities and pitfalls for gender mainstreaming’. London School of Economics: London, 2017. [Online]. Available at: <https://blogs.surrey.ac.uk/politics/2017/03/08/exiting-the-eu-opportunities-and-pitfalls-for-gender-mainstreaming/>.

<sup>16</sup> TUC, ‘Women’s Rights: the risks of Brexit’, TUC: London, 2016; and, TUC, ‘Women workers’ rights and the risks of Brexit’, TUC: London, 2016. It is projected that the rights of women part-time workers and temporary workers may be particularly at risk of repeal. See also, TUC, ‘Women workers’ rights and the risks of Brexit’, TUC: London, 2016, p.2.

post-Brexit recession,<sup>17</sup> as well as the extension of ministerial powers to rewrite laws post-Brexit without parliamentary oversight.<sup>18</sup>

It has been further observed that were Brexit, as projected, to result in significant economic damage and possibly further austerity, the adverse impact on everyday lives would most likely be gendered, with women, as compared to men, disproportionately affected,<sup>19</sup> compounding pre-existing gendered vulnerability and poverty. This projection is informed by consideration of the gendered nature of recent economic shocks, particularly the United Kingdom recession-austerity model that followed the 2008 global financial crisis.<sup>20</sup>

Against this backdrop, the social justice case has been made for the representation of women's interests 'at every level' of Brexit negotiations, and for guarantees on the safeguarding of gender equality protections post-Brexit in new United Kingdom law.<sup>21</sup> Because gender equality correlates with productivity and economic growth, and is as such 'fundamental to whether and how societies thrive', this appeal may also be made for compelling macroeconomic arguments in promotion of the interests of society at large.<sup>22</sup> This gender justice appeal has formed part of a wider social justice narrative, promoting the representation of diverse interests in negotiations to ensure the safeguarding of European Union derived protections that provide for *all* traditionally marginal groups.<sup>23</sup>

In sum, research suggests that Brexit could potentially pose a number of threats to Northern Ireland at the level of the economic and beyond, as well as significant risk to gender equality, women's rights and economic wellbeing in low-income households. It is within this particular discursive context that the paper will examine

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<sup>17</sup> M. Müller, 'We should ensure women's rights are safeguarded in the Brexit negotiations', LSE: London, 2016. [Online]. Available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/11/23/we-should-ensure-womens-rights-are-safeguarded-in-the-brexit-negotiations/>. See also, Fawcett Society, 'Equality. It's about time: campaign briefing note', Fawcett Society: London, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, S. Walker, 'Brexit will be disastrous for women unless we fight the rollback of our rights', *The Guardian*, 14 April 2017. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/14/brexit-womens-rights-control-equality>.

<sup>19</sup> A. Jenichen, 'What will Brexit mean for gender equality in the UK?' Aston University: Birmingham, 2016. [Online]. Available at: [www.aston.ac.uk/EasySiteWeb/GatewayLink.aspx?allid=285498](http://www.aston.ac.uk/EasySiteWeb/GatewayLink.aspx?allid=285498).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Fawcett Society, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> World Economic Forum, 'The case for gender equality'. [Online]. Available at: <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2015/the-case-for-gender-equality/>.

<sup>23</sup> Guerrina, op. cit.



women's perceptions of Brexit. To that end, the project has made recourse to focus group engagement. The project findings are set out below followed by recommendations for remedial policy and practice, which the findings inform.

### Summary of key findings

#### (i) Perspectival overview

- Participants' perspectives on Brexit **diverged sharply**, running along a continuum between vehemently pro- and anti-Brexit sentiment, reflecting competing claim-making found in political discourse that dominated the European Union referendum debate as well as claim-making found in social justice and equality discourse marginalised in that debate.
- To some extent, **demographic and geographic factors** appeared to correlate with perspectival positioning, with support for Brexit particularly strong among some older participants and anti-Brexit sentiment particularly strong in rural and border regions.
- There was also a certain **ethnonational dimension** to this perspectival division: in some cases, shared participant support for Brexit emerged as particularly strong in areas with a majority Protestant/unionist demographic profile while, conversely, shared participant wariness of, and opposition to, Brexit emerged as particularly pronounced where a majority Catholic/nationalist demographic profile pertained locally.
- This perspectival divergence is further detailed below.

#### (ii) Brexit uncertainty: profound concern and wariness

The nature and scale of the complexity of the Brexit process, and of uncertainty and ambiguity in political discourse over what Brexit might actually entail for Northern Ireland and women's interests, **generated profound multidimensional concern and wariness** among participants, which in many cases correlated with anti-Brexit sentiment.

- First and foremost, participants were concerned at uncertainty over the nature and likely implications of the **post-Brexit status of the border** between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, particularly:
  - the likely structural impact of any **restrictions on the free movement of goods and people** between both jurisdictions, including any change to the common travel area (of particular concern were the likely effects for rural communities, border regions, cross-border employment, the agri-food and manufacturing sectors, food prices, living standards and cross-border cooperation in health, education and transport);
  - the implications for **citizenship rights**; and,
  - the **political impact** of any imposition of a 'harder' border, as manifest in physical infrastructure comprising custom and/or immigration control, in effect, the impact on the relationship between peace and prosperity.
  
- Participant concern also correlated strongly with uncertainty over the relationship between **Brexit and women's interests**, specifically:
  - the effect on pre-existing **gender poverty and inequality** should Brexit, as forecast, result in significant economic damage and should government respond with further gendered austerity, impacting low-income households asymmetrically; and,
  - perceived risk to the **erosion of women's rights** associated with the capacity of government - post-Brexit - to repeal or weaken rights currently guaranteed under European Union law.
  
- Noting a correlation between the referendum result, sterling depreciation, rising prices, real wage decline and falling living standards, participants were further concerned that the Brexit agenda had already made individuals in Northern Ireland **economically worse off**, and that the prospect of actual withdrawal could compound this socio-economic dilemma.
  
- A further key dimension of participant concern correlated with uncertainty over potential **loss of European Union funding** without proper government mitigation, and its likely implications for affected cohorts, sectors and regions (of

particular concern was funding pertaining to agriculture, peacebuilding, cross-border cooperation and structural intervention).

- Concern at uncertainty over the wider relationship between **Brexit and rural wellbeing** (at the level of the economic and beyond) emerged as another major dimension of debate, drawing on insight that rural areas (border regions especially) could be particularly vulnerable to any post-Brexit economic downturn.
- Participant concern also corresponded to uncertainty as to the likely impact of withdrawal on the **wider women's sector**. It was argued that any Brexit economic downturn that led to further austerity retrenchments (specifically, both sectoral and welfare variants) would at once exacerbate pre-existing gendered vulnerability and jeopardise sectoral capacity to address such vulnerability.
- Participant concern further corresponded to uncertainty over the nature of **post-Brexit cross-sectoral regulation** in respect of, inter alia, the environment, employment, food safety and product quality.
- Lastly, concern was expressed at uncertainty over the cumulative cultural and normative impact of Brexit: it was posited that the Brexit agenda had incited **populist anti-migrant prejudice**, while also contributing to cultural insularity, and that this trajectory could be extended post-Brexit with renewed focus on immigration and border control.

### **(iii) Proposed remedial measures**

Following on from this articulation of concern about - and resistance to - Brexit, participants called for a plethora of remedial interventions from government to address the projected/actual impact of withdrawal on Northern Ireland in general and women's interests in particular. This included:

- proper **representation and accommodation of women's interests** in Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations;
- maintenance, post-Brexit, of European Union derived **gender equality protections**;
- realisation of a **bill of rights** for Northern Ireland to underpin equality protections for women and other marginal groups post-Brexit;

- proper **representation and accommodation of Northern Ireland economic priorities** and wider interests at Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations, taking account of the jurisdiction's unique geographic positioning, structural vulnerability and recent political-history (this appeal included an explicit call for '**special status**' for Northern Ireland in negotiation settlements);
- respect for **commitments made under the Good Friday Agreement** post-Brexit, properly accounting for the correlation between continuing peace and prosperity; and,
- compensation for any substantive loss of **European Union funding** in respect of, inter alia, agriculture, regional and cross-border development, social inclusion and peacebuilding.

Across different engagement sites, this exhorting of interventionism was juxtaposed with a significant level of scepticism about British government capacity to act as a custodian of, and advocate for, Northern Ireland's interests in Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations.

#### **(iv) Pro-Brexit camp**

In contrast to the aforementioned perspectival positioning, a fervently pro-Brexit dimension to participant discussion emerged, projecting that withdrawal would be **inherently advantageous** for Northern Ireland at the level of the economic and beyond. This perceived advantage was broadly associated, as follows, with a central dimension of the vote leave referendum campaign – namely, the notion of '**taking back control**'.

- First, it was held that union membership had impeded United Kingdom trade, and that transitioning to **post-Brexit control of trade** would correlate with fundamentally improved global trading relations and significant economic growth.
- Second, it was asserted that legislative integration with the union had occasioned unreasonable recourse to rights norms within the United Kingdom justice system in support of minority group claim-making (i.e. rights-based claim-making in respect of prisoners, migrants and asylum seekers), and that transitioning to **post-Brexit regulatory and legislative control** would help arrest this trajectory.

- Third, it was held that free movement of people within the union had exerted significant pressure on public services (schools, health and social housing), and that transitioning **to post-Brexit control of immigration policy** would ease this perceived pressure.<sup>24</sup>
- Fourth, participants in this camp claimed that immigration made possible under free movement of people had also displaced United Kingdom indigenes from the labour market, undercutting wages, and that **post-Brexit immigration control** would help challenge this supposed trend.<sup>25</sup>

#### (v) Brexit indifference

- In contrast to the aforementioned Brexit wariness and pro-Brexit sentiment, a third distinct perspectival category emerged, broadly characterised by **indifference to the prospect of withdrawal for Northern Ireland and women's interests**. This was very much the position of a tiny minority.
- The central notion here, as summarised by one participant, was that **membership of the union 'had not delivered'** on equality for women nor on economic growth in Northern Ireland and that, consequently, **'Brexit will not make any [substantive] difference'** on either front.
- A certain **political insularity** subsequently prevailed: the prospect of effecting meaningful remedial change to women's everyday lives and to economic growth in Northern Ireland was identified as intrinsically a matter for the devolved administration, with European Union membership identified as essentially immaterial to that prospect.

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<sup>24</sup> Such claim-making has been contradicted by research evidence. See, for example, C. Dustmann and T. Frattini, 'The fiscal effects of immigration to the UK', University College London: London, 2014. This study evidences that recent European immigrants made a net contribution of £22.1bn to United Kingdom public finances between 2000 and 2011, 34 per cent more than they took out as beneficiaries of public services.

<sup>25</sup> Such claim-making has been contradicted by research evidence. For example, a recent study established that:

there is still no evidence of an overall negative impact of immigration on jobs, wages, housing or the crowding out of public services. Any negative impacts on wages of less skilled groups are small. One of the largest impacts of immigration seems to be on public perceptions.

J. Wadsworth, 'Immigration and the UK labour market', LSE: London, 2015, p.1.

The recommendations that follow from these findings are set out below.

### Recommendations

- Government should provide for the **proper representation of Northern Ireland-specific interests** in all Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations with the European Union, pursuing meaningful and effective solutions to the totality of Northern Ireland-specific issues at stake in this debate, whether correlated with its unique geographical location, its structural vulnerability or its recent political-history.
  - To that end, government should ensure that negotiations give particular regard to the cumulative socio-economic, political, legal and cultural issues pertaining to (i) the future **status of the border** between the United Kingdom and Ireland; and, (ii) the terms of the **Good Friday Agreement** and its status as an international treaty.
  
- Government should also provide for the **proper representation of diverse interests** in all Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations, giving due regard therein to traditionally marginal groups, ensuring such cohorts are not subject to any erosion of legal protection following the transposition of European Union legislation into United Kingdom law. In so doing, government should:
  - expressly commit to **maintaining pre-existing gender equality protections**, which evolved under union membership, and to enhancing those protections where international best practice in this area further evolves;
  - ensure that any substantive Brexit policy change is subject to **rigorous gender-sensitive analysis**, identifying and addressing any asymmetrical adverse impact;
  - seek to quantify and address the impact of any post-Brexit economic damage on **pre-existing poverty and vulnerability**, particularly gendered variants, carrying out analysis therein that is sensitive to any disproportionate impact across different demographic groups; and,
  - provide for **meaningful stakeholder engagement** on Brexit policy change across all section 75 groups, where substantive issues of equality are at stake, and all affected sectors, where particular sectoral interests are at stake.

- Finally, the Consortium recommends that government give due regard to the **aggregate cross-sectoral loss of European Union funding** resultant from Brexit, particularly in respect of agriculture, peacebuilding, cross-border cooperation and structural intervention, proffering sufficient clarity therein as to the treasury position on compensating for that loss beyond any short-term commitments already given.
  - Within this context, government should properly attend to the **cumulative impact of Brexit on rural communities**, taking particular account of the farming sector's reliance on European Union subsidy, the importance of cross-border movement and cooperation to the agricultural sector at large and the nature of the substantive structural risk posed to border regions.

## **Section 1 Introduction**

### **1.1 Background**

In 2012, DSD in partnership with DARD launched a programme aimed at providing regional support for women in 'areas of greatest need' across Northern Ireland, defined as disadvantaged and rural areas.<sup>26</sup> More precisely, the programme sought to 'serve the needs' of disadvantaged women in these areas, defined as 'marginalised and isolated' individuals,<sup>27</sup> by 'enabl[ing] them to tackle disadvantage and fulfil their potential in overcoming ... exclusion'.<sup>28</sup>

The Women's Regional Consortium is funded under this programme and the brief for this small-scale project originated within that policy development context.

### **1.2 Overall aim and objectives**

The overall aim of this paper is to explore, in snapshot format, the perspectives of a cohort of women - living and working in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland - on the United Kingdom's impending withdrawal from the European Union, particularly their perspectives on the representation of women's interests and Northern Ireland priorities in Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations.

Three research objectives pertain:

- to critically assess the relationships between Brexit and Northern Ireland and Brexit and women's interests;
- to capture and examine women's perceptions of Brexit; and,
- to formulate policy recommendations aimed at addressing any identified substantive issues.

### **1.3 Methodology**

The methodological approach employed by the project combined a literature review with focus group engagement. The latter was facilitated by WSN, NIRWN, Women's Tec and FWIN as follows:

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<sup>26</sup> DSD/OFMDFM, 'Review of government funding for women's groups and organisations', DSD/OFMDFM: Belfast, 2012, p.32.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.41.

<sup>28</sup> DSD/NISRA, 'Regional support for women in disadvantaged and rural areas: survey of women's groups analysis', DSD/NISRA: Belfast, 2013, p.3.



- during June - August, WSN facilitated five focus groups at FWIN, Greenway Women's Centre, Atlas Women's Centre and Women's Tec; and,
- in September, NIRWN hosted a rural focus group at Carcullion House, Hilltown.

The selected cohort included women sector providers directly engaged in the delivery of frontline services to women in poverty and deprivation.

#### **1.4 Layout**

To theoretically frame the project, we begin by examining key arguments in the wider debate on actual/projected Brexit complications and implications. An evaluation of the research engagement dimension of the project then follows. After that, the paper concludes with a summary of the project's key findings and policy recommendations.

## 2 Framing the project

### 2.1 Introduction

In examining the perspectives on Brexit of a cohort of women living and working in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland, this paper is concerned with debate on the potential implications of withdrawal for Northern Ireland in general and for women in particular. Accordingly, in seeking to theoretically frame the project, this section will explore key dimensions of that debate. We will focus first, on projected structural consequences of withdrawal for the United Kingdom at large, then insight into possible Northern Ireland context-specific consequences and, finally, insight into potential gendered ramifications.

### 2.2 Brexit and the economy: trade, income and low-income households

Research affirms that the United Kingdom economy continues to be adversely impacted by the European Union referendum result. The substantial post-referendum depreciation of sterling has inevitably raised import prices, resulting in higher inflation. The latter has, in turn, been associated with increased public debt (given the correlation between higher inflation and higher debt interest on government borrowing) and stalled consumer spending (a 'key driver' of economic slowdown).<sup>29</sup> In addition, this post-referendum inflation increase is correlated with declining real wage growth (as prices rise more than wages) and, therein, falling living standards.<sup>30</sup> Analysis lends further insight into the nature of this structural dilemma, illustrating that average weekly pay, discounting bonuses and taking account of prices, remains lower than before the 2008 financial crisis, meaning that 'wage packets buy less than they did a decade ago'.<sup>31</sup> It has consequently been observed that 'workers are being punished by Brexit'.<sup>32</sup>

The United Kingdom government has signalled its intent to seek a 'bespoke' trade deal with the European Union, as compared to an 'off the shelf' option such as the so-called Norway model, whether in respect of any transitional arrangement or post-

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<sup>29</sup> Blanchflower, 'Britain is fast becoming', op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Blanchflower, 'Workers are being punished', op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

transitional (final) arrangement.<sup>33</sup> For its part, the European Union has made clear that the United Kingdom will not be able to ‘cherry-pick’<sup>34</sup> in negotiations to gain the benefits of union integration on trade (i.e. market access) without fulfilment of the kind of concomitant obligations to which the British government has hitherto - to different degrees - proven resistant in its Brexit pronouncements (whether, say, freedom of movement, regulatory compliance, budgetary contribution or recognition of the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice).

Against this backdrop of uncertainty and contestation, analysts have attempted to quantify the potential effects of actual withdrawal on trade and income. Of the many studies that have aimed to capture the potential macroeconomic consequences of Brexit, ‘nearly all’ predict a long-term loss of gross domestic product (GDP) for the United Kingdom associated with anticipated reduced trade.<sup>35</sup> This loss has been estimated at between £26 billion and £55 billion, almost double the comparative figure for the European Union as a whole.<sup>36</sup>

In ‘optimistic’ forecasting, where the United Kingdom retains full access to the European Union single market, akin to the Norway model,<sup>37</sup> average United Kingdom income falls by 1.3 per cent (or £850 per household).<sup>38</sup> By contrast, in ‘pessimistic’ modelling, where post-Brexit trade between the United Kingdom and European Union is governed by World Trade Organisation rules, resulting in increased trade costs, average United Kingdom income falls by 2.6 per cent (£1,700 per household).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Elgot, op. cit. Whilst not a member state of the European Union, Norway is nevertheless closely affiliated with the union in virtue of its membership of the European Economic Area and European Free Trade Association.

<sup>34</sup> On this, see, for example, K. Connolly, et al., ‘Angela Merkel: no special favours for UK over single market’, *The Guardian*, 28 June 2016. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/28/brussels-eu-summit-leaders-push-quick-divorce-america-germany-brexit>.

<sup>35</sup> Projections based on comparatives with the status quo of the United Kingdom remaining in the European Union and its single market. Begg and Mushövel, op. cit.

<sup>36</sup> S. Dhingra et al., ‘The consequences of Brexit for UK trade and living standards’, LSE: London, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> On this, see J. Henley, ‘Can the UK adopt the ‘Norway model’ as its Brexit solution?’ *The Guardian*, 1 December 2016. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/dec/01/can-the-uk-adopt-the-norway-model-as-its-brexit-solution>

<sup>38</sup> Shingra et al., op cit.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

It has been suggested that if government attempts to fiscally adjust in tax and spending policy for any such loss of GDP, then the 'burden of Brexit would fall more heavily'<sup>40</sup> on benefit and tax credit recipients in low-income households.<sup>41</sup> It is projected that where government places the full burden of adjustment on welfare spending, some low-income households could lose between £1,861 and £5,542 less per year (in 2014 pounds) in tax credit and benefit payments in 2020, and between £2,076 and £6,184 less per year in 2030.<sup>42</sup> On this view, Brexit could significantly aggravate poverty and inequality, widening the gap between rich and poor.

The bottom line here is this: the 'all-but-unanimous' view of economists is that Brexit will 'deeply damage' the United Kingdom economy;<sup>43</sup> where economists tend to disagree is on the question of the likely extent of that damage:

analysis from the Bank of England to the OECD to academia has all concluded that Brexit would make us economically worse off. The disagreement is mainly over the degree of impoverishment.<sup>44</sup>

So far, we have explored insight into the potential structural consequences of Brexit for the United Kingdom as a whole, noting the projection of significant economic damage and risk to economic wellbeing in low-income households. We turn now to consideration of its potential Northern Ireland-specific impact.

### **2.3 Brexit and Northern Ireland**

By reconfiguring the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union, Brexit will effect substantive change to the relationship between the former and Ireland as well as the relationship between both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. The likely nature and extent of that change, of course, remain unknown, reflecting wider Brexit uncertainty. However, within this context, commentators have sought to set out the potential ramifications of Brexit for Northern Ireland, at the level of the economic and beyond, examining different permutations of change.

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<sup>40</sup> Begg and Mushövel, *op. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> Armstrong et al. *op. cit.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Eichengreen, *op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup> Sampson et al., *op. cit.*

While Brexiteers forecast economic opportunities for Northern Ireland outside the European Union, '[t]he evidence suggests that the risks to the Northern Ireland economy posed by Brexit *probably outweigh* [any] ... opportunities'.<sup>45</sup> In large part, projected Northern Ireland vulnerability to the potential negative economic effects of Brexit relates to the jurisdiction's structural weakness and unique geographic positioning. That weakness is evident where structural comparatives are drawn between the jurisdiction and other parts of the United Kingdom with regard to levels of, inter alia, deprivation, unemployment, poverty, wages and productivity.<sup>46</sup> The geographic factor in question involves the notion that, post-Brexit, Northern Ireland will be the only part of the United Kingdom to share a direct land border with the European Union.

Debate on the potential economic consequences of Brexit for Northern Ireland has been dominated by this border issue, specifically, the question of the ramifications of any future restrictions on cross-border free movement of goods and people.<sup>47</sup> Both economies on the island are 'deeply interdependent', as manifest in the nature and extent of cross-border trade, labour market integration and all-island organisation of industry.<sup>48</sup> Up to 30,000 individuals on the island are categorised as 'cross-border', living and working on either side of the border as facilitated by the maintenance of the common travel area.<sup>49</sup> Critics worry that the prospect of a harder border places such cross-border economic activity in considerable jeopardy.<sup>50</sup>

Northern Ireland relies more heavily on the European Union as an export market than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. While the union is the destination for over half its exports, the destination for over a fifth of its total exports is the Republic of Ireland, making the latter its largest export market.<sup>51</sup> This reliance has fuelled concern about the prospect of significant economic damage in Northern Ireland

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<sup>45</sup> House of Lords European Union Committee, *op. cit.*, p.17.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>50</sup> Tonge, *op. cit.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

should Brexit end tariff- and quota-free trading relations between the United Kingdom and the European Union, with a 3 per cent loss of GDP predicted.<sup>52</sup>

The British government has a negotiating priority to make cross-border trade on the island of Ireland 'as seamless and frictionless as possible', as part of its aforementioned wider ambition to seek a bespoke, tariff-free trade arrangement with the European Union.<sup>53</sup> These border plans were recently outlined – albeit in extremely vague terms - in a government Brexit position paper on Ireland and Northern Ireland.<sup>54</sup> Critics remain sceptical about the likelihood of such a border scenario linked to such a bespoke arrangement, pointing out how such plans fundamentally contravene European Union principles governing economic relations with third countries (non-member states):

the principles declare that any relationship with the EU must be based on a balance of benefits and obligations. Non-member states will not be able to choose what aspects of EU integration they particularly favour. As such, *prospects for a bespoke, tariff-free Northern Ireland-EU cross-border trade arrangement appear slim.*<sup>55</sup>

In very broad terms, the basis of contravention is that with these border plans the government is, in effect, seeking the benefits of a customs union (tariff-free market access) without concomitant obligations<sup>56</sup> (such as jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice).

The imposition of European Union tariffs would asymmetrically impact different sectors of the Northern Ireland economy. The agri-food sector is at particular risk.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Press Association, 'Goodwill on both sides to resolve Irish border issue, says Theresa May', *The Guardian*, 13 May 2017. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/may/13/goodwill-on-both-sides-to-resolve-irish-border-issue-says-theresa-may>.

<sup>54</sup> HM Government, 'Northern Ireland and Ireland: position paper', HM Government: London, 2017. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/northern-ireland-and-ireland-a-position-paper>. For critical analysis of same, see F. O'Toole, 'The UK government's border proposals for Ireland are absurd'. *The Guardian*, 16 August 2017. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/16/uk-government-border-proposals-ireland-brexit-position-paper>. See also, E. Tannam, 'The UK position paper on Northern Ireland and Ireland is both conciliatory and vague'. LSE: London, 2017. [Online]. Available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2017/08/17/uk-position-paper-on-northern-ireland-and-ireland-is-both-conciliatory-and-vague/>.

<sup>55</sup> Tonge, op. cit.

<sup>56</sup> Tannam, op. cit.

<sup>57</sup> Other Northern Ireland sectors deemed particularly vulnerable to the negative economic effects of Brexit include construction and manufacturing. Oxford Economics. 'The economic implications of a UK exit from the EU for Northern Ireland', Oxford Economics: Belfast, 2016.

Northern Ireland is more reliant on agriculture than elsewhere in the United Kingdom.<sup>58</sup> The European Union is the sector's largest export market, with the Republic of Ireland accruing the majority of its annual sales.<sup>59</sup> Post-Brexit tariffs, quotas and customs controls would adversely impact supply chains, food prices, family incomes and the wider economy.

To compound matters, the agri-food sector is also especially vulnerable to the impact of the loss of union funding. This vulnerability reflects the level of Northern Ireland farm dependency on income under the common agricultural policy.<sup>60</sup> Estimates suggest that 87 pence of every pound earned by Northern Ireland farmers derives from the union's single farm payment.<sup>61</sup> On this view, in the absence of commensurate and sustained post-Brexit replacement funding mechanisms from the British government, agriculture in Northern Ireland would be 'unviable'.<sup>62</sup> It has been posited that future savings from the United Kingdom contribution to the European Union budget might help fund such replacement mechanisms. Yet there is a substantive problem with this suggestion: such monies would be retained by the United Kingdom treasury, and whilst agriculture is a competence of the devolved administration in Northern Ireland, 'it is not clear ... whether any [such monies] ... would trickle down to the devolved administrations'.<sup>63</sup>

Of course, loss of European Union funding without sustained commensurate replacement would adversely affect the Northern Ireland economy in other ways. The jurisdiction is more reliant on such funding than elsewhere in the United Kingdom.<sup>64</sup> Border regions have particularly benefited from this resourcing,<sup>65</sup> and it is projected that loss without replacement could have a 'devastating effect' both there and beyond, in the economy at large.<sup>66</sup> While there is uncertainty about the

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<sup>58</sup> Tonge, *op. cit.*

<sup>59</sup> House of Lords European Union Committee, *op. cit.*, p.14.

<sup>60</sup> Tonge, *op. cit.*

<sup>61</sup> D. Phinnemore and L. McGeown, 'After the EU referendum: establishing the best outcome for Northern Ireland', Centre for Democracy and Peace Building: Belfast, 2016, p.32.

<sup>62</sup> House of Lords European Union Committee, *op. cit.*, p.25.

<sup>63</sup> E. Basheska and K. Fearon, 'After the referendum – what next for the EU and the UK?' QUB: Belfast, 2016. [Online]. Available at: <http://qpol.qub.ac.uk/referendum-what-next-eu-uk/>.

<sup>64</sup> House of Lords European Union Committee, *op. cit.*, p.68.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.47.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

availability of future replacement funding, commentators remain sceptical that government will substantively address any post-Brexit funding gap.<sup>67</sup>

Concerns have also been raised that any hardening of the border involving tariffs and customs controls, resulting in physical checks, which 'seems inevitable in the event of abolition of a customs union',<sup>68</sup> could aggravate political sensitivities in the jurisdiction, affecting political stability: 'the uncertain impact of Brexit ... threatens to disrupt the fragile political stability now seen in Northern Ireland'.<sup>69</sup> This dimension of the debate focuses in part on political sensitivities around the potential implications of withdrawal for the common travel area and the 'special status' of United Kingdom and Irish citizens in the islands, including the right of Northern Ireland citizens to hold Irish - and thus European Union - citizenship.<sup>70</sup> The politicisation of the Brexit debate in Northern Ireland was manifest in the ethnonational dimension of the referendum result: while most nationalists voted to remain, the majority of unionists voted to leave.<sup>71</sup> It has been suggested that taking account of such political sensitivities in a context of 'continuing intercommunal polarity' makes a 'strong case' for special treatment for Northern Ireland in Brexit negotiations.<sup>72</sup>

Against this backdrop, commentators have cautioned that in preserving the advances in recent decades in peacebuilding, north-south cooperation on the island of Ireland and east-west relations between the United Kingdom and Ireland, government should ensure that, post-Brexit, it expressly respects the terms of the Good Friday Agreement and its status as an international treaty.<sup>73</sup> This juncture of the debate has included a reinvigorated call for the realisation of a bill of rights for Northern Ireland to underpin equality protections introduced under the treaty.<sup>74</sup> The treaty specifically commits the British government to the 'complete incorporation into

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. Certain commitments have been given by the United Kingdom government on funding until 2020, uncertainty references post-2020 gap.

<sup>68</sup> Tonge, *op. cit.*

<sup>69</sup> House of Lords European Union Committee, *op. cit.*, p.6.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Tonge, *op. cit.*

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. For example, the notion of a special bilateral trade agreement between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland has been mooted, with special accommodation for Northern Ireland. On this, see House of Lords European Union Committee, *op. cit.*

<sup>73</sup> House of Lords European Union Committee, *op. cit.*

<sup>74</sup> See, for example. C. Harvey, 'Brexit, Northern Ireland and human rights', Rights NI: Belfast, 2017. [Online]. Available at: <http://rightsni.org/2017/05/brexit-northern-ireland-and-human-rights/>.



Northern Ireland law of the European Convention on Human Rights’, with provision of ‘direct access to the courts, and remedies for breach of the convention’.<sup>75</sup> This call has been amplified by concern that withdrawal may ‘embolden’ the British government to ‘retreat’ from this commitment by substituting adherence to the convention with a United Kingdom bill of rights.<sup>76</sup>

While we have thus far focussed on research insight into the potential economic consequences of Brexit for the United Kingdom as a whole, and key aspects of its projected Northern Ireland-specific impact, we turn now to examine the question of its potential gendered effects.

#### **2.4 Brexit and women’s interests**

In a European Union referendum debate dominated by ‘national interest’ issues such as sovereignty, fiscal impact and immigration, women’s voices and interests (including women’s rights and equality) were sidelined, reflecting a broader marginalisation of social justice discourse in that debate.<sup>77</sup> Compensating for this discursive deficit, commentators have endeavoured to capture the potential gendered effects of Brexit for the United Kingdom, taking account of the substantive contribution that membership of the European Union has made to the advancement of women’s rights and equality in the region:

[w]hen we ... leave ... the additional layer of accountability and recourse provided by the European Court of Justice and related enforcement mechanisms [w]ill be lost ...without the legal framework provided by [European Union] membership there is certainly a risk that current or future [United Kingdom] governments could row back on women’s rights and vital [equality] protections could be lost.<sup>78</sup>

Particular concern has been raised about the potential risk posed by Brexit to working women’s rights, many enhancements of which derived from the European Union’s *acquis communautaire*, such as provision in respect of equal pay for work of equal value, discrimination on the grounds of sex and maternity leave. In large part, this identified risk correlates with the danger that – outside of the union – the United Kingdom government could pursue the kind of ‘highly de-regulatory agenda’

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<sup>75</sup> Tonge, *op. cit.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Guerrina, *op. cit.*

<sup>78</sup> Engender, ‘The EU and gender equality’, Engender: London, 2016.

championed by the vote leave camp in the referendum debate.<sup>79</sup> Broadly, the idea here is that easing the regulatory (i.e. red-tape) burden on business might engender conditions conducive to the erosion of such rights. Such a manoeuvre could ultimately risk aggravating gender equality by jeopardising women's access to, and retention and progression within, the labour market. This concern has been amplified in light of proposals to extend ministerial powers to rewrite laws post-Brexit without parliamentary oversight.<sup>80</sup>

It is further argued that if Brexit, as forecast, should lead to recession in the United Kingdom, then this apparent risk to working women's rights and gender equality could be heightened, were government to respond by explicitly linking the ambition of stimulated economic growth to the de-regulation of business.<sup>81</sup> Of course, because gender equality correlates with productivity and economic growth, and is as such 'fundamental to whether and how societies thrive',<sup>82</sup> a policy of this kind - that aimed to stimulate growth but threatened gender equality - may be considered inherently inconsistent.

It has also been noted that such a recession scenario could further undermine gender equality were it to prompt the kind of gendered recession-responsive austerity measures rolled out in the United Kingdom from 2010, given the disproportionate adverse impact of this austerity model on women, as compared to men.<sup>83</sup> It is estimated that austerity-driven tax and benefit change in the United Kingdom since 2010 has taken a total of £79 billion from women, as compared to £13 billion from men.<sup>84</sup> Women can be particularly vulnerable to recession-driven austerity cuts in welfare spending given gendered differentials in financial

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<sup>79</sup> Guerrina, op. cit.

<sup>80</sup> A. Asthana, 'Female MPs urge May to review Brexit team's gender balance'. *The Guardian*, 18 July 2017. [Online]. Available at: [https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jul/18/female-mps-urge-may-to-review-brexit-teams-gender-balance?CMP=tw\\_t\\_gu](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jul/18/female-mps-urge-may-to-review-brexit-teams-gender-balance?CMP=tw_t_gu).

<sup>81</sup> Guerrina, op. cit. See also, Müller, op. cit.

<sup>82</sup> World Economic Forum, op. cit.

<sup>83</sup> Jenichen, op. cit.

<sup>84</sup>This figure was calculated based on losses apportioned to the individual within households receiving payments. H. Stewart, 'Women bearing 86% of austerity burden, Commons figures reveal', *The Guardian*, 9 March 2017. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/09/women-bearing-86-of-austerity-burden-labour-research-reveals>. Research also indicates that associated cuts in the same period to public sector services have also disproportionately affected women, given key gender differentials in service use. J. Ginn, 'Austerity and inequality: exploring the impact of cuts in the UK by gender and age', *Research on Ageing and Social Policy*, 1(1), 28-53, p.31.

vulnerability correlated with their lack of economic participation in the public sphere. The latter includes gendered financial vulnerability correlated with the relationship between the restricted nature of women's participation in the labour market (characterised, for example, by underemployment entailing the over-concentration of women in part-time, low paid jobs); the aggregate unpaid work and time burden placed on women by the gendered division of labour in the private sphere; and, welfare dependency. In short, the idea is that any post-Brexit economic downturn 'would bear more costs on women than men, as they are more frequently situated in more vulnerable working and social positions'.<sup>85</sup>

From this perspective, it has been lamented that the British government's Brexit negotiation stance has demonstrated 'an overarching blindness' to (i) the extent of the European footprint in the United Kingdom equality framework; and, (ii) the consequential likelihood that withdrawal 'carries a substantial risk' to the interests of women, and other traditionally marginal groups, unless those interests are expressly safeguarded in new United Kingdom law.<sup>86</sup>

Commentators have subsequently set out the social justice case for the representation of the diverse interests of all traditionally marginal groups in Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations, including the representation of women's interests 'at every level' of negotiations, exhorting government to ensure that it properly embeds and safeguards the norm of equality in post-Brexit United Kingdom legislation.<sup>87</sup> So, for example, the Fawcett Society has launched a sex discrimination law review to 'defend legislative protections for women in the face of Brexit' and ensure gender equality in the United Kingdom does not 'lag behind' the rest of Europe post-Brexit.<sup>88</sup>

Within this context, gender-sensitive analysis of Brexit-associated economic, fiscal and trade policies has been promoted as well as other kinds of analysis similarly geared to take account of any asymmetrical impact of Brexit policy on different

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<sup>85</sup> Müller, *op. cit.*

<sup>86</sup> Guerrina, *op. cit.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* See also, House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 'Ensuring strong equalities legislation after EU exit inquiry', House of Commons: London, 2017.

<sup>88</sup> Fawcett Society, *op. cit.*

demographic groups.<sup>89</sup> Because, as noted, gender equality correlates with productivity and economic growth, and is as such ‘fundamental to whether and how societies thrive’, a compelling structural case may also be made for the integration of a gendered perspective into negotiations in promotion of the aggregate economic interests of society at large.<sup>90</sup>

In sum, then, research would suggest that Brexit could potentially threaten gender equality and women’s rights and economic wellbeing in the United Kingdom, underlining the social justice case for guarantees in Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations on the safeguarding of women’s interests and European Union derived equality protections in new United Kingdom law.

## **2.5 Section summary**

This section sought to theoretically frame the project by briefly exploring key dimensions of the debate on the potential implications of Brexit. As we have seen, research forecasts that Brexit will ‘deeply damage’ the United Kingdom economy<sup>91</sup> and potentially poses a number of particular threats to Northern Ireland, at the level of the economic and beyond, as well as significant risk to gender equality and women’s rights.

We turn now to an exploration of the substantive findings that emerged from the engagement dimension of the project.

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<sup>89</sup> Guerrina, op. cit.

<sup>90</sup> World Economic Forum, op. cit.

<sup>91</sup> Eichengreen, op. cit.

## **Section 3 Brexit: women's perspectives**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This section captures and analyses the perceptions and perspectives of a cohort of women living and working in disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland, who engaged in the project's focus group processes on the subject of Brexit (particularly, the representation of women's interests and Northern Ireland priorities in withdrawal and post-Brexit negotiations).

### **3.2 Perspectival overview**

Participants' perspectives on Brexit diverged sharply, running along a continuum between vehemently pro- and anti-Brexit sentiment, reflecting competing claim-making found in the political discourse that dominated the European Union referendum debate as well as claim-making found in social justice discourse marginalised in that debate.

Perspectives predicated in social justice discourse tended to posit correlations between the legislative and normative disentangling of the United Kingdom from the European Union and potential risk to the maintenance of extant rights and equality protections derived from union membership.

There was a certain ethnonational dimension to this perspectival division: in some cases, shared participant support for Brexit emerged as particularly strong in areas with a majority Protestant/unionist demographic profile while, conversely, shared participant wariness of, and opposition to, Brexit emerged as particularly pronounced where a majority Catholic/nationalist demographic profile pertained locally. To some extent, demographic and geographic factors also appeared correlated with perspectival positioning, with support for Brexit particularly strong among older participants and anti-Brexit sentiment particularly strong in rural and border regions.

### **3.3 Brexit uncertainty: profound concern, wariness and anti-Brexit sentiment**

The nature and scale of the complexity of the Brexit process, and of uncertainty and ambiguity in political discourse over what Brexit might actually entail for Northern Ireland and women's interests, engendered profound multidimensional concern and

wariness among participants, which in a significant number of cases corresponded to anti-Brexit sentiment.

This concern correlated strongly with uncertainty and ambiguity in political discourse over the question of the post-Brexit status of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and its potential implications at the level of the economic and beyond. There were three main aspects to this border related discourse. First and foremostly, participants were concerned at the likely structural impact of any cross-border restrictions on the free movement of goods and people (including any change to the common travel area). Particular emphasis was placed on the potential adverse impact on rural communities, border regions, cross-border employment, the agri-food sector, food prices and cross-border cooperation in health, education and transport.

A second key aspect of this border related discourse focused on the potential implications of withdrawal for citizenship rights, particularly the right of Northern Ireland citizens to hold Irish - and thus European Union - citizenship. Finally, while referencing the well-rehearsed relationship between peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland, participants raised the question of the potential political and security impact of any imposition of a harder border between both jurisdictions: 'we do not want to go back to customs posts and feelings from the Troubles' (focus group participant). This discursive juncture included the articulation of concern that the Brexit agenda had incited populist anti-migrant prejudice and racism, while also contributing to cultural insularity in the jurisdiction, and that this trajectory could be extended post-Brexit with renewed focus on immigration and border control.

Participant concern also correlated strongly with uncertainty over the relationship between Brexit and women's interests. In large part, this involved concern at the potential impact of withdrawal on pre-existing gendered poverty and vulnerability. As noted, the United Kingdom recession-austerity model that followed the 2008 global financial crisis disproportionately affected women adversely, as compared to men, exacerbating extant gendered poverty and vulnerability. Referencing this status quo, participants were troubled at the prospect of further austerity in the event of Brexit resulting in further recession, as has been forecast. This concern deepened following

participant reflection on a perceived risk of post-Brexit erosion of equality protections derived from union membership, associated with the removal of the guarantee for equality rights provided by European Union law.

Concern at withdrawal also correlated strongly with uncertainty over the projected loss of European Union funding, and its potential consequences for affected cohorts, sectors and regions, in circumstances where government would not commit to proper mitigation of such loss. Of particular concern was the prospect of loss without commensurate replacement of funding in respect of agriculture, peacebuilding, cross-border cooperation and structural intervention (aimed at, inter alia, regional development, social inclusion and enhanced employability).

Participants were also worried at the prospect of post-Brexit loss of funding in the community and voluntary sector, in particular, the wider women's sector. It was observed that any Brexit associated economic downturn that led to further austerity retrenchments (including both sectoral and welfare variants) would at once (a) exacerbate pre-existing gendered poverty and vulnerability, including in-work variants and that affecting workless households, and (b) jeopardise sectoral capacity to address such poverty and vulnerability. As one participant put it:

Brexit means less money all round and therefore less money for the community and voluntary sector, which will not only mean job losses but it will also mean that the people that the ... sector support are also going to lose out.

Noting a correlation between the European Union referendum result, sterling depreciation, rising prices, real wage decline and falling living standards, participants were further concerned that the Brexit agenda had already made individuals in Northern Ireland economically worse off, and that the prospect of actual withdrawal would only but compound this dilemma.

Concern at forecast Brexit economic damage was regionally framed. It was posited that some areas of Northern Ireland, such as districts of Belfast and rural border areas, could be more vulnerable to any Brexit-associated economic downturn given pre-existing structural weakness, such as lower levels of employment and higher levels of deprivation and poverty. Within this context, uncertainty over the wider

relationship between Brexit and rural wellbeing (at the level of the economic and beyond) emerged as a major dimension of debate. This rural factor addressed the potential loss – without ongoing government mitigation - of European Union funding of agriculture. It was emphasised that Northern Ireland’s agricultural sector would be unsustainable without such mitigation.

Lastly, participant concern also corresponded to uncertainty over the nature of post-Brexit sectoral regulation in respect of, inter alia, the environment, employment, food safety and product standards. This issue was summarised by one participant thus: ‘the [European Union] provides safeguarding and regulation ... what will happen if we no longer have those safeguards?’

### **3.3.1 Remedial measures**

Following on from this articulation of concern, participants called for a plethora of remedial interventions from government to take account of the projected and actual impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland in general and women’s interests in particular. This included:

- proper representation and accommodation of women’s interests in Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations;
- safeguarding, post-Brexit, of all European Union derived gender equality protections;
- realisation of a bill of rights for Northern Ireland to underpin equality protections for women and other marginal groups post-Brexit;
- proper representation and accommodation of Northern Ireland economic priorities and wider interests at Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations, taking account of the jurisdiction’s unique geographic positioning, structural vulnerability and recent political-history (this appeal included an explicit call for special status for Northern Ireland in negotiation settlements);
- respect for commitments made under the Good Friday Agreement post-Brexit, properly accounting for the correlation between continuing peace and prosperity;
- compensation for any substantive loss of European Union funding in respect of, inter alia, agriculture, regional and cross-border development, social inclusion and peacebuilding;



- greater accountability of government post-Brexit; and,
- intervention to address the informational deficit on Brexit across society at large.

Across different engagement sites, this exhorting of interventionism was juxtaposed with a significant level of scepticism about the United Kingdom government's capacity to act as a custodian of Northern Ireland's interests in Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations, as captured by one participant thus:

[T]heresa May has a perception of what she wants, but at the end of the day Europe will have the final say. Northern Ireland will be the last concern in any Brexit negotiations, the British treasury aren't fond of Northern Ireland at the best of times.

### **3.4 Pro-Brexit camp**

In contrast to the aforementioned perspectival positioning, a fervently pro-Brexit dimension to participant discussion emerged, projecting that withdrawal would be intrinsically advantageous for Northern Ireland at the level of the economic and beyond. This perceived advantage was broadly associated, as follows, with a central dimension of the vote leave referendum campaign – namely, the notion of taking back control.

First, it was posited that union membership had impeded United Kingdom trade, and that transitioning to post-Brexit control in this sphere would correlate with fundamentally improved global trading relations and significant economic growth. Second, it was asserted that legislative integration with the European Union had occasioned inappropriate recourse to rights norms within the United Kingdom justice system in support of minority group claim-making (i.e. rights claim-making in respect of prisoners, migrants and asylum seekers), and that transitioning to post-Brexit regulatory and legislative control would help arrest this trajectory.

Third, it was held that the free movement of people within the union had exerted significant pressure on existing public services (schools, health and social housing), and that transitioning to post-Brexit control of immigration policy would ease this perceived pressure. Finally, participants claimed that immigration made possible

under free movement of people had displaced United Kingdom indigenes from the labour market, undercutting wages, and that post-Brexit immigration control would help challenge this apparent trend.

### **3.5 Brexit indifference**

In sharp contrast to the aforementioned Brexit opposition/wariness and pro-Brexit sentiment, a third distinct category of perspective on Brexit emerged in discussions, which was broadly characterised by indifference to the prospect of withdrawal for Northern Ireland and women's interests. This was very much the position of a tiny minority.

The central notion here, as summarised by one participant, was that membership of the union 'had not delivered' on equality for women nor on economic growth in Northern Ireland and 'so Brexit will not make any [substantive] difference' on either front. A certain political insularity consequently prevailed: the prospect of effecting meaningful remedial change to women's everyday lives and to economic growth in Northern Ireland was identified as intrinsically a matter for the devolved administration, with European Union membership held as essentially immaterial to that prospect: 'our fight [for social justice and equality] is with our devolved government' (focus group participant).

### **3.6 Section summary**

This section sought to capture the perspectives of a cohort of women living and working in disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland on the question of Brexit, in particular, the representation of women's interests and Northern Ireland priorities in Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations. As observed, the articulation of participant concern at Brexit resulted in the identification of remedial measures to mitigate the projected impact of withdrawal, and underscored the importance of the proper representation and accommodation of women's interests and Northern Ireland priorities in these negotiations. Following on from this analysis, the paper concludes in the next section by laying out some recommendations to take account of the substantive concerns and issues raised.

## Section 4 Conclusion

Building on research insight into the potential implications of Brexit for Northern Ireland and women's interests, the overall aim of this brief paper was to capture in snapshot format the perspectives on Brexit of a cohort of women living and working in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland.

As we have seen, the literature suggests that Brexit could potentially pose a number of particular threats to Northern Ireland, at the level of the economic and beyond, as well as significant risk to gender equality and women's rights. And, as we have also seen, responding to that insight, participants' perspectives contrasted sharply, attitudinally ranging from opposition to, and wariness of, Brexit – resulting in calls for government interventionism to help mitigate the impact of withdrawal on Northern Ireland and gender equality - through to indifference to, and explicit support for, the prospect of withdrawal. That indifference was premised on the notion that Brexit would make no substantive difference in Northern Ireland either to the structural status quo or the accommodation of women's interests. By contrast, that support was premised on the notion that withdrawal constituted an essentially positive policy development.

The point has been made and underscored that profound uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity abounds in the wider Brexit debate. As implied, this uncertainty is such that it remains unclear precisely how seriously the Irish question and the question of women's interests will actually be taken in withdrawal negotiations and negotiations on the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union. Certain political factors would seem to complicate this picture. First, the absence of a functioning devolved government continues to deny Northern Ireland input in directly representing its case for consideration in negotiations to the British government. That said, even were an executive in situ, the reality of cross-party working<sup>92</sup> and deep partisan division on this subject inherently restricts the scope for articulation of that case as a unitary and consolidated position. Second, it has been observed that the gender imbalance in the United Kingdom Brexit negotiating team restricts the scope for the proper articulation of women's voices and the effective representation of

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<sup>92</sup> D. Phinnemore et al. 'To remain or leave? Northern Ireland and the EU referendum', Centre for Democracy and Peace Building: Belfast, 2016, p.6.

women's interests at the negotiations.<sup>93</sup> However, as research would suggest, it cannot be assumed that there is a necessary correlation between increased participation by women in public decision-making of this kind and the prospect of increased gender-responsiveness in related policymaking decisions and outcomes.<sup>94</sup> The bottom line here is this: ultimately, the representation of Northern Ireland priorities and women's interests in these negotiations will fall directly to the British government and there are, of course, no guarantees that either category of concern will be properly recognised and accommodated.

These observations, findings and conclusions have informed the formulation of policy recommendations to address the subject at hand. These recommendations are set out below following a summary of the project's key findings.

### Summary of key findings

#### (i) Perspectival overview

- Participants' perspectives on Brexit **diverged sharply**, running along a continuum between vehemently pro- and anti-Brexit sentiment, reflecting competing claim-making found in political discourse that dominated the European Union referendum debate as well as claim-making found in social justice and equality discourse marginalised in that debate.
- To some extent, **demographic and geographic factors** appeared to correlate with perspectival positioning, with support for Brexit particularly strong among some older participants and anti-Brexit sentiment particularly strong in rural and border regions.
- There was also a certain **ethnonational dimension** to this perspectival division: in some cases, shared participant support for Brexit emerged as particularly strong in areas with a majority Protestant/unionist demographic profile while, conversely, shared participant wariness of, and opposition to, Brexit emerged as

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<sup>93</sup> Asthana, 'Female MPs urge May', op. cit.

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, R. L.T. Miranda, 'Impact of women's participation and leadership on outcomes', United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs, New York: 2005. [Online]. Available at: [http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/eql-men/docs/EP.7\\_rev.pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/eql-men/docs/EP.7_rev.pdf).

particularly pronounced where a majority Catholic/nationalist demographic profile pertained locally.

- This perspectival divergence is further detailed below.

## **(ii) Brexit uncertainty: profound concern and wariness**

The nature and scale of the complexity of the Brexit process, and of uncertainty and ambiguity in political discourse over what Brexit might actually entail for Northern Ireland and women's interests, **generated profound multidimensional concern and wariness** among participants, which in many cases correlated with anti-Brexit sentiment.

- First and foremost, participants were concerned at uncertainty over the nature and likely implications of the **post-Brexit status of the border** between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, particularly:
  - the likely structural impact of any **restrictions on the free movement of goods and people** between both jurisdictions, including any change to the common travel area (of particular concern were the likely effects for rural communities, border regions, cross-border employment, the agri-food and manufacturing sectors, food prices, living standards and cross-border cooperation in health, education and transport);
  - the implications for **citizenship rights**; and,
  - the **political impact** of any imposition of a 'harder' border, as manifest in physical infrastructure comprising custom and/or immigration control, in effect, the impact on the relationship between peace and prosperity.
- Participant concern also correlated strongly with uncertainty over the relationship between **Brexit and women's interests**, specifically:
  - the effect on pre-existing **gender poverty and inequality** should Brexit, as forecast, result in significant economic damage and should government respond with further gendered austerity, impacting low-income households asymmetrically; and,
  - perceived risk to the **erosion of women's rights** associated with the capacity of government - post-Brexit - to repeal or weaken rights currently guaranteed under European Union law.

- Noting a correlation between the referendum result, sterling depreciation, rising prices, real wage decline and falling living standards, participants were further concerned that the Brexit agenda had already made individuals in Northern Ireland **economically worse off**, and that the prospect of actual withdrawal could compound this socio-economic dilemma.
- A further key dimension of participant concern correlated with uncertainty over potential **loss of European Union funding** without proper government mitigation, and its likely implications for affected cohorts, sectors and regions (of particular concern was funding pertaining to agriculture, peacebuilding, cross-border cooperation and structural intervention).
- Concern at uncertainty over the wider relationship between **Brexit and rural wellbeing** (at the level of the economic and beyond) emerged as another major dimension of debate, drawing on insight that rural areas (border regions especially) could be particularly vulnerable to any post-Brexit economic downturn.
- Participant concern also corresponded to uncertainty as to the likely impact of withdrawal on the **wider women's sector**. It was argued that any Brexit economic downturn that led to further austerity retrenchments (specifically, both sectoral and welfare variants) would at once exacerbate pre-existing gendered vulnerability and jeopardise sectoral capacity to address such vulnerability.
- Participant concern further corresponded to uncertainty over the nature of **post-Brexit cross-sectoral regulation** in respect of, inter alia, the environment, employment, food safety and product quality.
- Lastly, concern was expressed at uncertainty over the cumulative cultural and normative impact of Brexit: it was posited that the Brexit agenda had incited **populist anti-migrant prejudice**, while also contributing to cultural insularity, and that this trajectory could be extended post-Brexit with renewed focus on immigration and border control.

### **(iii) Proposed remedial measures**

Following on from this articulation of concern about - and resistance to - Brexit, participants called for a plethora of remedial interventions from government to address the projected/actual impact of withdrawal on Northern Ireland in general and women's interests in particular. These included:

- proper **representation and accommodation of women's interests** in Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations;
- maintenance, post-Brexit, of European Union derived **gender equality protections**;
- realisation of a **bill of rights** for Northern Ireland to underpin equality protections for women and other marginal groups post-Brexit;
- proper **representation and accommodation of Northern Ireland economic priorities** and wider interests at Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations, taking account of the jurisdiction's unique geographic positioning, structural vulnerability and recent political-history (this appeal included an explicit call for '**special status**' for Northern Ireland in negotiation settlements);
- respect for **commitments made under the Good Friday Agreement** post-Brexit, properly accounting for the correlation between continuing peace and prosperity; and,
- compensation for any substantive loss of **European Union funding** in respect of, inter alia, agriculture, regional and cross-border development, social inclusion and peacebuilding.

Across different engagement sites, this exhorting of interventionism was juxtaposed with a significant level of scepticism about British government capacity to act as a custodian of, and advocate for, Northern Ireland's interests in Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations.

### **(iv) Pro-Brexit camp**

In contrast to the aforementioned perspectival positioning, a fervently pro-Brexit dimension to participant discussion emerged, projecting that withdrawal would be **inherently advantageous** for Northern Ireland at the level of the economic and beyond. This perceived advantage was broadly associated, as follows, with a central

dimension of the vote leave referendum campaign – namely, the notion of **‘taking back control’**.

- First, it was held that union membership had impeded United Kingdom trade, and that transitioning to **post-Brexit control of trade** would correlate with fundamentally improved global trading relations and significant economic growth.
- Second, it was asserted that legislative integration with the union had occasioned unreasonable recourse to rights norms within the United Kingdom justice system in support of minority group claim-making (i.e. rights-based claim-making in respect of prisoners, migrants and asylum seekers), and that transitioning to **post-Brexit regulatory and legislative control** would help arrest this trajectory.
- Third, it was held that free movement of people within the union had exerted significant pressure on public services (schools, health and social housing), and that transitioning to **post-Brexit control of immigration policy** would ease this perceived pressure.
- Fourth, participants in this camp claimed that immigration made possible under free movement of people had also displaced United Kingdom indigenes from the labour market, undercutting wages, and that **post-Brexit immigration control** would help challenge this supposed trend.

#### **(v) Brexit indifference**

- In contrast to the aforementioned Brexit wariness and pro-Brexit sentiment, a third distinct perspectival category emerged, broadly characterised by **indifference to the prospect of withdrawal for Northern Ireland and women’s interests**. This was very much the position of a tiny minority.
- The central notion here, as summarised by one participant, was that **membership of the union ‘had not delivered’** on equality for women nor on economic growth in Northern Ireland and that, consequently, **‘Brexit will not make any [substantive] difference’** on either front.
- A certain **political insularity** subsequently prevailed: the prospect of effecting meaningful remedial change to women’s everyday lives and to economic growth



in Northern Ireland was identified as intrinsically a matter for the devolved administration, with European Union membership identified as essentially immaterial to that prospect.

The recommendations that follow from these findings are set out below.

### Recommendations

- Government should provide for the **proper representation of Northern Ireland-specific interests** in all Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations with the European Union, pursuing meaningful and effective solutions to the totality of Northern Ireland-specific issues at stake in this debate, whether correlated with its unique geographical location, its structural vulnerability or its recent political-history.
  - To that end, government should ensure that negotiations give particular regard to the cumulative socio-economic, political, legal and cultural issues pertaining to (i) the future **status of the border** between the United Kingdom and Ireland; and, (ii) the terms of the **Good Friday Agreement** and its status as an international treaty.
  
- Government should also provide for the **proper representation of diverse interests** in all Brexit and post-Brexit negotiations, giving due regard therein to traditionally marginal groups, ensuring such cohorts are not subject to any erosion of legal protection following the transposition of European Union legislation into United Kingdom law. In so doing, government should:
  - expressly commit to **maintaining pre-existing gender equality protections**, which evolved under union membership, and to enhancing those protections where international best practice in this area further evolves;
  - ensure that any substantive Brexit policy change is subject to **rigorous gender-sensitive analysis**, identifying and addressing any asymmetrical adverse impact;
  - seek to quantify and address the impact of any post-Brexit economic damage on **pre-existing poverty and vulnerability**, particularly gendered variants, carrying out analysis therein that is sensitive to any disproportionate impact across different demographic groups; and,

- provide for **meaningful stakeholder engagement** on Brexit policy change across all section 75 groups, where substantive issues of equality are at stake, and all affected sectors, where particular sectoral interests are at stake.
- Finally, the Consortium recommends that government give due regard to the **aggregate cross-sectoral loss of European Union funding** resultant from Brexit, particularly in respect of agriculture, peacebuilding, cross-border cooperation and structural intervention, proffering sufficient clarity therein as to the treasury position on compensating for that loss beyond any short-term commitments already given.
  - Within this context, government should properly attend to the **cumulative impact of Brexit on rural communities**, taking particular account of the farming sector's reliance on European Union subsidy, the importance of cross-border movement and cooperation to the agricultural sector at large and the nature of the substantive structural risk posed to border regions.