



The Northern Ireland Economy: **Women on the Edge?**

A Comprehensive Analysis of the Impacts of the Financial Crisis

Section 3: Employment



Employment

Employment

Women's employment is characterised by gender segregated labour-markets, gender gaps in pay, higher levels of part-time work and high concentration in the informal sector. They tend to have lower earnings and less social protection. Most lone parents depend upon housing benefit, working tax credits and other benefits to top up their income. The interruption of women's careers for child bearing, child rearing and caring can impact on their earnings, their status in the workplace and career prospects and on their pensions and quality of life in older age. There is little acknowledgement of the informal caring roles of women and few steps have been taken to quantify and account for women's unpaid labour.

V – Artist, art teacher and carer¹

For much of her life V was carrying three jobs. Now she tutors 16 hours a week. Her husband was made unemployed recently and her take home pay of £1,000 a month is the only income they have. She has accumulated very little pension as her first ten years of employment were on hourly pay. She is a part-time carer for her parents aged 85 and 80, who will be coming to live with her, visiting and cooking for them five days a week.

"I thought I could retire in three years and start back at art. But a lot depends on me now."

There are many arguments for women's unimpeded access to the labour market: primary principles of fairness and equality; efficient deployment of human resources; choosing from a larger pool of talent; workforce diversity as a driver of innovation as women bring in new ideas and preferences in the development of products and services.² Women's access to the labour market leads to their economic empowerment and is a powerful tool to combat poverty by increasing working-age income and older-age pension entitlements, provided issues of low and equal pay are dealt with.

Until the economic downturn women in Northern Ireland had been experiencing

historically high levels of employment, although less women than men were employed, and since the downturn this gender gap in employment has widened by 3.1%. There were 345,000 women employed in Northern Ireland in the period April to June 2009 representing a fall of 4.5% in the number of women employed over the year, an employment rate for women of 62.2% compared with the male rate of 68.7%. In the same period in 2010, there were 359,000 women in employment, but despite this increase the employment rate for women is 61.4% compared with the male rate of 71%, demonstrating the widening gap.³

The Europe 2020 Strategy⁴ includes the headline target of increasing employment of women and men aged twenty to sixty-four to 75%. The EU Employment Guidelines⁵ underline the importance of implementing, assessing and following-up employment policies that promote gender equality and work-life balance. The Annual Growth Survey⁶ adopted by the European Commission shows that involuntary part-time work is still an issue in some Member States and that women wishing to re-enter the labour market continue to face obstacles.⁷

Of all Northern Ireland jobs 78% are full-time and 22% are part-time.⁸ Thirty seven per cent of women work part-time, compared with just 8% of men, and 82% of all part-time employees are women. About 15% of women working part-time want but cannot get full-time work and around 5% of women are in temporary positions (men 6%). A much greater percentage of women are not in permanent full-time jobs compared to men: 39% of female and 12% of male employees.

A massive 92% of women – 95% of part-time and 91% of full-time – work in the service sector compared with 65% of men.⁹ Of full-time female employees 59% are employed in public administration, education and health compared with 23% of males.¹⁰ Women account for almost two-thirds of the Northern Ireland public sector workforce (63.4%); they are 61.3% of full-time and 75.5% of part-time employees.¹¹ Thus, women are likely to be the biggest losers in public sector job losses and pay freezes.

Within the service sector, employment is highly segregated by gender: 23% of female employees



may work in administration and secretarial roles compared with 8% of males, but they make up 75% of those employed in these posts. Women are also over-represented as nurses, care assistants, childcare workers, domestics/cleaners and in catering in the public and private sectors.

G – Classroom assistant and short term trade union organiser¹²

G is “starting to panic now”. She had been a full time permanent classroom assistant before becoming one of a number of people seconded from the Education and Library Board to help union members with job evaluation and representing their interests. She was told to return to her workplace on 31st March 2011, but informed by her Head Teacher that there was no full-time job to return to, only work for ten hours a week. She was considering taking redundancy and looking for work elsewhere but discovered all jobs advertised were temporary. She applied for work as a trade union tutor through an FE College on an ‘as and when needed’ basis, but this work is insecure in the current climate as trade union courses are cancelled when people are unable to get paid release from their jobs to attend.

“I’ve always been a grafter. I’ve never been unemployed. I’ll take any job. I’ll take redundancy, which will be a pittance, put it in the bank and apply for a cleaning job or whatever. Before I got this job I was doing three little jobs.” G does the day-to-day money management in the family. She and her husband earn similar amounts, so from April 2011 the family income of around £26,000 will reduce by 50%. They are worried about their £600 a month mortgage and insurance, interest rate rises, debt repayments and coping with the increases in food and fuel prices. One daughter is at university and working 15 hours a week to help support herself. For their second daughter “university is not an option with fees of £9,000 a year.”

She shares the care for her father and mother (one has cancer, the other Alzheimer’s) with two sisters. They live in Dun Laoghaire (Dublin) and she travels there three out of four weekends a month.

Women’s job losses in the recession

Women have never been in the same economic position as men. Thus, while the recession and its

aftermath are difficult for everyone, women are less well positioned than men to weather the crisis, both in relation to its immediate pressure and in the longer term. Often recessionary challenges manifest as magnification and intensification of existing challenges and it can be difficult for women who are already in economic hardship to differentiate between their regular livelihood and the added impact of the recession.

Already poor working conditions can become worse and leave vulnerable women workers with no room to manoeuvre. For example, when jobs are scarce it is difficult to contest an employer who changes a work schedule to hours that are incompatible with childcare responsibilities or availability of public transport; these were raised by women working as domestics in the public sector during this project as barriers to retaining employment. Migrant women reported unfair working practices during this research where they are not allowed time off for a medical appointment or when a child is sick. There have been an increased number of complaints to advice agencies and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland about dismissal for reasons of pregnancy. Some women working part-time have had their hours reduced below the threshold to qualify for in-work benefits. There have been reports of women on public sector zero-hours contracts getting little or no work due to cutbacks.

“One person lost her family credit as she was offered more hours which she took. But there is no overtime this year and she has less money but cannot get reassessed for [Working] Family [Tax] Credit until April.”¹³

A is a lone parent in Co Antrim

A worked overtime and the Social Security Agency told her she had earned £3,000 too much to qualify for the Working Family Tax Credit which she had been receiving and that she needed to pay £5,000 back. It took her three years to pay it back on monthly repayments. She paid all but the last two months which were written off when she was on long-term sick. She will not do overtime now as it is not beneficial and in case it happens again.

“I have a mortgage. If interest rates go up I’ll have to sell the house. Yet private rent in this area is higher than my mortgage.”¹⁴



Despite this litany of impacts, much less attention has been paid to women in the recession. When the recession hit, the pattern of women's job losses was different and less visible than men's. The latter were the subject of headline news focusing on multiple lay-offs in the construction industry. There was less media interest in stories of reduced hours for those on low wages, mainly women, or small groups of redundancies across retail outlets, social care and personal services where women work. There was little analysis of what was happening to part-time jobs where women predominate. And women have been hit harder still in the later waves of job losses.

ONS spokesman David Bradbury on Channel 4 News

*"The pattern in recent months is that things are better for men and worse for women. This is different to the height of the recession when men were most affected."*¹⁵

In the third quarter of 2010 two and a half million people were out of work in the UK, including more than one million jobless women; a figure that is at its highest in more than twenty years. Northern Ireland was among the regions hardest hit.¹⁶ The three months to February 2011 saw another hike in unemployment with predictions of further losses for women.

Over the previous year, female unemployment went up by 64,000 while male unemployment went down by 69,000.¹⁷ The TUC found that young jobless women had more than doubled in several regions. With jobs in the public sector set to reduce further over the course of 2011 and beyond, job losses are likely to get worse for women. In areas such as local government and the NHS women comprise between two-thirds and three-quarters of the workforce and are situated in the lower grade and insecure jobs which are usually the first to be hit in any cutback. An additional consequence is that traditional major career routes for women are contracting at a time when women are re-entering the labour market in larger numbers and women's unemployment is rising.

TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber
"Female unemployment has been rising for many

months and the number of women out of work is at a level last seen in the late 1980s. What's particularly worrying is that these figures come before public sector job losses really start to bite. With hundreds of thousands of jobs set to go in local government alone - where three quarters of staff are female - there are real fears that rising female joblessness could increase in pace."¹⁸

In Britain with an estimated 500,000 public sector jobs going, 325,000 of these are thought to be women.¹⁹ The Fawcett Society estimated the actual percentage of women at risk from public sector cuts to be nearer 70%, while the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development put the figure at closer to 80%.²⁰ While the number of jobs under threat in Northern Ireland is not yet clear, PriceWaterhouseCooper estimated that public expenditure cuts might result in a loss of 36,000 jobs of which 20,000 would be direct public sector jobs.²¹ Taking women's share of public sector employment this would suggest that women's share of the public sector job losses alone might be around 12,680. However, part-time workers are likely to be disproportionately affected, which would push women's share of redundancies up as they make up over three-quarters of part-time staff (see below).

Ian Brinkley of The Work Foundation

*"Looking over the recovery so far women have been adversely affected by two trends - the drop in employment in the public sector and parts of the banking sector and weak employment growth in more traditional industries such as retailing and hospitality. These sectors all have above average shares of female employment. In contrast, manufacturing and high tech and professional services have seen some recovery in employment and these sectors all employ large numbers of men."*²²

While the absolute numbers may be larger in Britain, the impact for women in Northern Ireland is likely to be more severe due to the uniquely large public sector and women's dependence on it. As noted previously, no OECD member has more than 25% of its workforce employed by the state, yet the public sector accounts for more than 30% of all Northern Irish jobs.²³ Even if the majority of job losses are



managed by early retirement and voluntary redundancy over a period of time, the contraction of employment leading to a lower ceiling on public sector jobs permanently means fewer employment opportunities for women in the future. Furthermore, the closing down of jobs may exacerbate inequality within employment as there may be less opportunity to move between grades, with fewer women moving up into senior positions where they are significantly under-represented. This is likely to be one of the long-lasting impacts of the recession on women.

The indications are that women are already being badly affected. Women make up 75.5% of part-time workers in the public sector and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland noted that the reduction in the size of the public sector in 2009 was wholly accounted for by the fall in the part-time count which they put at 6.9% or 2,000 jobs.²⁴ Moreover, they found that while the private sector largely accounted for the overall fall in employment in 2009, 80% (2,000) of net part-time job losses occurred in the public sector. The decline in public sector part-time employment mainly affected women, with a fall of 9% compared with 2% for their male counterparts.

Public sector efficiencies and cut-backs are underway with employers reducing the use of temporary and casual staff and cutting back on the hours of permanent full-time and part-time staff in the health sector.²⁵ The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust confirmed that it had reduced agency staff, temporary staff and overtime.²⁶ ECNI Monitoring figures show a decrease of 2,174 people working in part-time jobs in health and education; many of these will be women.²⁷ Significant savings of some £51.7million had to be found from current expenditure in the 2010-2011 education budget where salary costs account for 70% of the expenditure.²⁸ More than three hundred teachers are being made redundant in the summer of 2011 and trade unions and principles warned that this is "the tip of the iceberg".²⁹ Moreover, cuts in hours and pay have a bigger impact on women than men as more women work fewer hours and for lower wages.

"One of our members had money saved to keep her as a principal out of full-time teaching with a

class so that she can support those pupils needing special needs support. Now that principal will have to go back into class, a teacher will be made redundant and the provision of extra support for those children will not be possible."³⁰

Impacts of the downturn

Cuts to hours affect women disproportionately given that many work part-time and the number of hours worked can drop below the threshold for claiming in-work benefits for those on low incomes. Unison reported that among the first to have their hours cut in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area were catering staff, where some men have specialist jobs but the majority are women, and domestics who are 90% women. Nurses, who are 90% women, have had their hours cut also and it was proposed to cut the hours of receptionists, who are 90% women and many of whom are lone parents, from twenty to fifteen hours which is under the sixteen hours needed to qualify for certain benefits.³¹

In West Belfast cleaners were told that the system of work was being changed and women were expected to come in earlier. They raised the issue of public transport availability to come in from 6am instead of 6.45am. They were told "If you don't do it they will get contractors in."³²

In West Belfast there were reports of the difficulty in making ends meet on reduced hours, with stories of women walking to work as they could not afford transport, especially of women on the early shift at a weekend to avoid paying for a taxi.³³

In Co Antrim there were problems with available and cost effective transport. "I normally have to get three buses and there is no public transport in my area during holiday periods."³⁴

The gender pay gap means that women's earned incomes are lower than men's and a reduction in an already low pay packet is a significant problem. This is exacerbated when women must find the money to pay for childcare to allow them to remain in work; childcare is low in supply, high in cost and increasingly unaffordable for those on low income with the reduction in support under the child element of working tax credits. Family and caring responsibilities can mean that women who are not in employment



are less likely than men to qualify for Job Seekers Allowance, which may exacerbate their financial difficulties.

Term-time leave was introduced in the health sector, including for domestic and auxiliary staff, a number of years ago. Although it is open to all, it is mainly women who apply for leave in order to look after children in school holidays. Women apply before April and a weekly deduction is made from the wage to cover the leave. Unison and Unite reported that term-time leave was very popular but that it was becoming harder to get. The amount of time a member of staff can take has been shortened. Several health employers reviewed their provision in 2010 or 2011 and reduced the amount of time a member of staff can take; in one example a limit of two weeks was imposed across the board because the employing authority could not provide cover for the leave requested. Further curtailments have been mooted for 2011. Downsizing in the public sector affects capacity to offer term-time leave as there is less room for manoeuvre with fewer staff. Other flexible working arrangements are similarly affected.³⁵

*"There is no flexible working. I wanted to start half-an-hour earlier because I am the main carer for my Dad. Another domestic wanted to start half-an-hour later to hand over her kids to her husband who was working the night shift. They may accommodate it if it is for a short period of time, but not permanently."*³⁶

Many of the jobs most suitable for parents looking for part-time work are the kind of jobs that are disappearing in the public sector. For example, the recent austerity measures have been introduced on top of three years of annual 3% cuts accumulating to £44m of savings in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust where it is estimated that 2,500 jobs have already gone through redeployment.³⁷ Women report this happening throughout the education and health and social care sectors. Lone parents in particular, who are expected to find work when their youngest child reaches seven years (five years in October 2011), will find their opportunities for employment restricted. Moreover, when public sector pay freezes are factored in, along with cuts in work-related benefits, women are facing significant income loss.

Terms and conditions of employment are often better for women in the public sector, including with better pension provisions. A Code of Practice is in force in Northern Ireland (and until recently in Britain) to prevent the emergence of a two-tier workforce in cases where public sector employees were contracted out to a service provider. It covers new employees alongside staff who had been transferred from the public sector and provided for broadly comparable pay, terms and conditions. "The promotion of equality of opportunity is core to the aims of the Code."³⁸

The Code of Practice has been withdrawn in Britain and replaced with a set of good practice guidelines. It is important that the Code, which is embedded into the Northern Ireland Administration's procurement process, is retained given its strength in protecting equality. Withdrawal would weaken public-private parity and a slide towards poorer terms and conditions. A large proportion of those affected will be women, many providing catering and cleaning services.

Women in the private sector are also affected by the downturn. The average wage in the retail sector, employing 126,000 people, is just 75% of the average Northern Ireland wage. Other low wage areas of high female employment include administration and hotels.³⁹ Women workers' hours are being moved around, e.g. to cover late nights and weekends rather than employing more staff, and women are under pressure to accept the changes or if they cannot, for childcare and other family reasons, employers are cutting their hours and giving them to someone else. This is reflected in changes to terms and conditions and new contracts; where they cannot get a negotiated agreement, employers are pushing contract changes through on the basis of having an economic, technical or organisational reason, issuing thirty days notice of change of contract, but women usually make an accommodation to keep their jobs.⁴⁰

Several unions independently reported breakdowns in staff relations in the competition to get extra hours due to women's desperation for work. USDAW noted that "women are clashing against women for hours", especially since they need to work twenty-four hours to get Working Tax Credit instead of sixteen hours as



previously. Unison spoke about lone parents among domestics and many other women whose husbands have been laid off and cannot afford a cut in hours with arguments developing between women. UNITE gave similar examples of lone parents under pressure to get every possible hour of work along with women who are the main breadwinners saying, "it's very uncomfortable."⁴¹

"It's dog eat dog. Everyone is out for every penny. It is hard to deal with. People don't speak to each other over overtime and it's getting worse. It has gotten worse since summer 2010."

"Some people keep notebooks on how many hours other people have worked so they are not done out of hours. It's splitting people apart."

Unison also reported that women are "demoralised, scared to open their mouths if their husband has already lost his job and can't afford to lose a day's pay. You just put your head down and keep going." Unite has found, too, that the downturn has impinged on people's willingness to speak out with concerns for fear that "I'll not be asked in to do overtime if I rear up."

"I am stressed about the [cleanliness standards] audit and I feel demoralised. I have high blood pressure since last year. I am a worrier and I get upset. I feel they are coming and picking on things that I can't fix e.g. paint on the walls."

"Years ago we laughed a lot, and partied at the drop of a hat. We can't laugh now."⁴²

Community care worker

Care staff are given ten minutes plus five minutes travel to and from the house for a toilet call, that is, to go to the house, assist the person to the toilet, assist her back to her chair and return. It used to be fifteen minutes plus five minutes.

"It always takes more time than this to do the job properly. A woman the other day took me much more than ten minutes to get her to the toilet. She walks/shuffles slowly. When we say it is impossible to do it in ten minutes then we are told it is swings and roundabouts and we can make the time up somewhere else. Then we are late for other clients who expect us to be on time and complain if we are late. The majority we work with are elderly, and they are mainly elderly women."⁴³

Gender Pay Gap

Women's contribution to the family income has increased, with women's individual income contributing more than 50% of family income for 21% of all couples.⁴⁴ Yet, the Fawcett Society noted that 40 years after the Equal Pay Act, women can expect to earn 15.5 per cent less than men in the UK and some 45,000 women were currently fighting equal pay claims.⁴⁵

In Northern Ireland the 2010 Annual Survey of hours and Earnings shows that

- Overall female median hourly earnings excluding overtime were 89.9% of male earnings.
- Women's full-time hourly earnings excluding overtime were 100.1% of male earnings.
- Part-time employees experienced a 6.0% contraction in gross weekly earnings and part-time women earning less than men for the first time in 4 years.⁴⁶

The gender pay gap is not only about pay rates, but about working patterns and opportunity. Share of full-time and part-time employment – women are 82% of part-time workers – curtailed hours and interrupted careers to look after children all impact on pay. The pay gap can be detected in overall median annual earnings where women earned 46.2% less than men, due to working around seven hours less per week, and full-time women workers earned 13.8% less than their male counterparts. Enquiries to the Equality Commission about equal pay have more than doubled since 2007-08.⁴⁷ Significant differences between what women and men earn over a lifetime are reflected in women's lower pension income, and higher risk of pensioner poverty.

Rebalancing the economy from the public to the private sector carries financial penalties for women in relation to pay and terms and conditions. Public sector wages in Northern Ireland are over one-third (34%) higher than private sector wages. This is the largest public/private sector wage differential in the UK. Yet public sector wages are not out of line with the rest of the UK outside London, so it is clearly the low wages in the private sector that cause the differential. Private sector wages are the lowest in the UK, at 82% of the UK average.⁴⁸



Nicola Smith, TUC Chief Economist

"The divide between men's and women's pay is more than 20% in the private sector, against less than 12% in the public sector, so even if the government is right that many of those laid off by the state will find new private sector jobs, women may find themselves lagging farther behind their male colleagues."⁴⁹

The UK Coalition Government does not intend to implement the Equality Act provisions which give government the power to require large companies to do annual gender pay audits, measure and publish differences in pay rates between men and women and outline plans to ensure that all staff are treated fairly.⁵⁰ Rather, the government says it will work with business on how best to support increased transparency on a voluntary basis. Decisive action is needed in Northern Ireland before another generation of women find they are earning less than men throughout their working lives.

Equal pay for equal work, enshrined in the Treaty of Rome of 1957, is one of the founding principles of the European Union. The gender gap sits at 17.5% across the EU in 2011. The European Commission held the first European Equal Pay Day on 5 March 2011 and will make this an annual event to highlight how much longer women need to work than men to earn the same amount – currently estimated to be two months a year.

The Commission tackles, and encourages Member States to tackle, the complex causes for the pay gap including direct discrimination, undervaluing of women's work, segregation in the labour market, traditions and stereotypes, and the balancing of work and family life (where women face unequal sharing of family and care responsibilities, part-time work and interrupted work patterns). The Commission's strategies include awarding companies prizes and rankings; tools to identify and correct unjustified pay gaps; encouraging women and men to enter professions where they are under-represented; work-life balance measures; and improving pay transparency and the effect on equal pay of part-time and fixed-term contracts.

One innovative approach is introducing employers to a software tool that calculates

whether there is a gender pay gap and if this gap is due to objective factors (such as a person's level of education or years of service) or factors that cannot be explained and which, for the most part, can be assumed to be caused by pay discrimination. Based on a Swiss calculator developed in 2009 by the country's Federal Office for Equality between Women and Men, the tool has been used in Germany and Luxembourg. If inequalities are found, advice and support is available to companies to help them develop solutions to close the gap.⁵¹

Discrimination at work against women stunts their opportunities to have a full and fulfilling career. Complaints by pregnant women have remained consistent in Northern Ireland over the years. With the onset of recession, advice agencies and support organisations report an increase in affected clients.⁵² This is supported by the Equality Commission's case monitoring which shows that five hundred and ten women came to them between April 2007 and March 2010.⁵³ Behind this is likely to be considerable numbers of women who are not coming forward to report discrimination.

Alongside eradicating discrimination a complete change in culture and practice in relation to sharing domestic and caring responsibilities is needed. Until more men take greater responsibility for children, women's pay and prospects will continue to be threatened by interrupted careers and short-term working. There has been some headway on legislation with paid paternity leave and unpaid parental leave to encourage fathers to share in family responsibilities and government proposes to make parental leave more flexible from 2015. It could be revolutionary in helping couples to share the burdens of work and childcare more fairly. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg hoped the proposals would make flexible working the cultural norm.⁵⁴ The Northern Ireland Executive should move speedily to adopt proposals to extend parental leave and flexible working in Northern Ireland.

The attitude and behaviour of employers is critical to providing the culture in which men as well as women will exercise their rights. It is disappointing, therefore, that the Institute of Directors (IoD) constantly raises concerns about



regulating for maternity and parental leave.⁵⁵ In response to recent proposals to enable parents to share parental leave by 2015, both the IoD and the Chamber of Commerce expressed reservations. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has rolled back from their first welcome of the policy.⁵⁶ The UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive should provide support to the business sector to ensure they are up to speed in implementing new parental leave and flexible working arrangements.

Women with children increasingly make up a greater proportion of the labour force than women without children.⁵⁷ At the same time, caring for children is likely to be one of the most significant reasons why women are economically inactive, many of whom may wish to work. Matching available jobs with women's unpaid caring role is difficult in Northern Ireland in the absence of a comprehensive infrastructure of high-quality, accessible and affordable childcare. This affects women's capacity to work full-time, remain in the labour market throughout their working life and progress up a salary scale alongside male colleagues. Part-time and atypical contracts may assist these women to remain in work but at a cost to their pay, career development, promotion prospects and pensions.

Taking responsibility for dependent care can also carry a financial penalty. Reductions in spending on social care will impact disproportionately on women as they rise to the task of plugging the care gap once again. Already 6 million people in the UK do unpaid care work, and over their lifetime seven out of ten women will be carers. Carers UK fear that the dignity and independence of older and disabled people will be undermined and more families will be forced out of work and pushed to breaking point to care for them."⁵⁸

When women with children and other dependant caring responsibilities lose their jobs they face the particular barrier of trying to balance paid work with unpaid caring in seeking new employment. In their previous jobs they may have settled into a working pattern that fits with their home responsibilities. Their job reach may be limited by looking only for work that is part-time or can offer flexibility, yet it is not certain that employers will be as flexible in the

immediate recovery period from recession as they seek to make up lost ground.

Childcare for employment has not received priority in Northern Ireland childcare strategies. A different approach has been taken in Wales where both providing childcare for working parents and supporting childcare enterprise, both in terms of commercial enterprise and social enterprise, form core parts of the Welsh Assembly Government's childcare strategy.⁵⁹ The Women and Work Commission recommended more attention to supporting parents with children under three to afford quality childcare.⁶⁰

Conclusions

Media reporting of job losses during much of the recession focused on large scale redundancies in areas like construction while women were losing jobs in smaller groups in retail, care and services employment. With public expenditure cuts women will be facing substantially more job losses in the future as they make up almost two-thirds of the public sector workforce in Northern Ireland. Women working part-time are already bearing the brunt of the cuts. At the same time more women are moving into the labour force, including lone parents who will soon be required to be available for work when their youngest child reaches five years.

The pressure of the economic downturn, coupled with longer term cutbacks in the public sector is leading to uncomfortable working environments. Women are competing with each other for fewer available hours of work. At the same time, flexibility from employers appears to be closing down thus making it harder for women with caring responsibilities. It is important that employers in the public and private sector are encouraged to maintain good working practices regarding flexibility.

The gender pay gap, in wage terms, is widening in Northern Ireland and may widen further with the reduction of public sector jobs for women as wages are lower in the private sector. In re-balancing the economy from the public to the private sector women are also likely to lose out in terms and conditions and pension provision. In any event pensions for women are affected by their lower wages and interrupted employment.



The gender pay gap is more than about hourly, weekly or monthly pay. It must take account of women's working patterns. For example, many more women than men work part-time. Women take time out of employment for childcare responsibilities, whether for a child's early years or taking time off work during school holidays and making a salary sacrifice. Lack of appropriate childcare is a fundamental barrier to women's employment opportunity and earnings. In Northern Ireland provision is worse than elsewhere in the UK and considerably behind leading countries in Europe.

To support women in employment the Northern Ireland Executive will need to amend its childcare strategy if it does not sufficiently address making quality childcare affordable and accessible to working parents throughout Northern Ireland. The Welsh Assembly Government might provide a model in its attention to both childcare for working parents and childcare as an opportunity to grow business and social economy enterprises.

Recommendations

- The Executive should require transparent pay arrangements and introduce mandatory pay audits for companies' workforces in Northern Ireland. The Ministers for DEL and DETI should encourage equal pay initiatives in the workplace and provide leadership for the annual European Equal Pay Day. The departments should review the impact of part-time work and fixed-term contracts on equal pay.
- The Northern Ireland Executive should move speedily to adopt proposals to extend parental leave and flexible working in Northern Ireland, and DETI should provide support to the business sector to ensure businesses are prepared for implementation.
- The Northern Ireland Executive should significantly increase the provision of child daycare that fits with the working hours of parents. It should ensure that employment-related childcare is a core part of its childcare strategy and DEL and DETI should contribute to childcare developments. The Executive should appoint a lead Minister and department to drive the childcare strategy forward.
- Priority should be given within the childcare strategy to driving up the supply of high-quality, accessible daycare that supports parents to access the labour market and remain in employment. Funding should be allocated to expand daycare places. To further assist with this there should be dedicated business support from DETI and its agencies for private, voluntary and independent enterprises offering childcare.
- The Executive should gather and make available comprehensive childcare statistics at one central point and track the improvement in provision of child daycare that is suitable for working parents.
- The Executive should assess the gaps in entitlements to family-related leave, childcare and other challenges for those with caring responsibilities so they can address these and respond positively and immediately to future EU measures.
- All assistance should be provided to enable women to remain in the labour market and build up pension entitlements that are equal to men's. The Executive should ensure that policies on equal pay, flexible working and childcare are aligned with this goal.
- The Executive should monitor its policies to improve gender equality in the labour market and ensure these meet the requirements of the EU Employment Guidelines, amending policies where necessary.
- OFMdfM and DFP should finalise the Maintain the Code of Practice on Workforce Matters in Public Sector Contracts in Northern Ireland and reinforce their application through the Northern Ireland Procurement Guide.



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- 4 *EU's Strategy for jobs and smart, sustainable, inclusive growth*: EUCO 13/1/10 REV 1.
- 5 These form part of the Europe 2020 integrated guidelines: OJ L 308, 24.11.2010.
- 6 18066/10+ Add 1-3
- 7 European Pact for Gender Equality 2011-2020, Council Conclusions, Council of the European Union, 7370/11 Soc 205, Brussels, 8 March 2011, p3.
- 8 *Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey* January-March 2011.
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