



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

Perceptions of Unmet Demand for Community-based Women's Education and Training

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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 is funded by the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland (hereafter, DSD) and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland (hereafter, DARD).¹

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,

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

needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these 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

As is well established in the literature, the agency, life chances and life outcomes of women in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland can be fundamentally constrained by the experience of different forms of marginalisation, exclusion, isolation and vulnerability.² This can include the experience of educational disadvantage,³ characterised by difficulties affecting *equal* access to, retention within, and progression from, formal/statutory educational and training processes.⁴ Equality in education ‘matters’ in the modern context precisely because ‘education is indispensable for the *full exercise* of people’s capabilities, choices and freedoms in an information-driven age’.⁵

Such educational disadvantage can invariably restrict educational attainment and, in severe cases, result in affected cohorts having ‘little or no qualifications’.⁶ Low educational attainment of this kind may, in turn, adversely impact women’s economic participation and financial independence to the extent that educationally disadvantaged women may be at particular risk of becoming ‘trapped in a cycle of welfare dependency and isolation’.⁷ The corollary is that educational disadvantage may profoundly impact individuals’ life prospects and well-being.

Community-based women’s education/training in the Northern Ireland case,⁸ as beyond, has tended to emerge and evolve in response to learner need generated by

² See, for example, B. Hinds, ‘The Northern Ireland economy: women on the edge? A comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the financial crisis’, WRDA: Belfast, 2011.

³ Educational disadvantage is a contested notion. As understood here, it is associated with the denial of equal ‘access to and participation within different levels of formal education’, correlated with other forms of disadvantage; K. Lynch and J. Baker, ‘Working paper 28, equality in education: an equality of condition perspective’, *Theory and Research in Education 2005*, Vol. 3, No.2: 131-164, p.1.

⁴ On this see, PWC, ‘Longitudinal evaluation of the learner access and engagement pilot programme - final report’, DEL: Belfast, 2012; H. McLaughlin, ‘Women living in disadvantaged communities: barriers to participation’, Belfast: WCRP, 2009; and, M. Feeley, ‘Making good learning partnerships: examining the experience and potential with the community-based women’s education sector and the further education sector’, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland: Belfast, 2002.

⁵ J. Baker, K. Lynch, S. Cantillion and J. Walsh, *Equality: from theory to action*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2004, p. 141.

⁶ PWC, op. cit., p.ii.

⁷ L. Patterson and K. Dowd, ‘Using the women’s community education approach to deliver community employment training: a case study from Longford women’s link’, Aontas: Dublin, 2010, p.121.

⁸ Broadly, such provision may be characterised as education/training for women by women in women-only community spaces aimed at addressing the diverse learning needs of educationally disadvantaged women. Feeley, op. cit., pp.iii-iv.

such educational disadvantage, with the express aim of accommodating that need.⁹ This paper is the product of small-scale qualitative research that explored affected cohorts' perceptions of unmet demand for such provision in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction. The research followed up on other Consortium research on the same subject completed in October 2014,¹⁰ which indicated perceived underprovision that cut across a plethora of contrasting disciplines, levels, intended course outcomes and learner profiles.

The follow-up project was developed in response to escalating mobilisation¹¹ within the provider sector at hand, characterised by claim-making suggestive of a significant increase in unmet demand since completion of the 2014 project. The research brief for the follow-up project has entailed an exploration of that claim-making from the perspectives of the same kind of affected cohorts as comprised the focus of the first project, i.e., not only educational providers themselves but also prospective learners. And, the overall aim of this paper is therefore to capture what both kinds of affected cohorts perceive¹² as the nature of such unmet demand in the period since completion of the first project. To that end, the second project encompassed focus group, interview and survey engagement with such cohorts.

The principal findings of the project are set out below. As we shall see, there is some degree of thematic correspondence between the substance of these findings and that of the 2014 project.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ C. Walsh, 'Community-based women's education/training: women's perceptions of gaps in provision', Women's Regional Consortium, Belfast: 2014.

¹¹ As we shall see, in large part, that mobilisation has centred around concerns over loss and lack of capacity associable with loss and lack of funding, as well as other funding issues, most notably those associated with the 2014-2020 European Social Fund programme. The first call for funding under priorities 1 and 2 of the programme opened on 28 November 2014 with a closing date of 9 January 2015. The period of funding offered was 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2018. On this, see, for example: WRC, 'Update on European Social Fund NI 2014 - 2020', WRC, Belfast: 2015. Available online at: <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/news/update-european-social-fund-ni-2014-2020>.

¹² So the focus is explicitly on women's *perceptions* of gaps. Any empirical evaluation/testing of this claim-making to establish/quantify 'actual' gaps is beyond the space and remit of this brief paper.

Summary of findings

Nature of perceived unmet demand

- Provider participants universally depicted the education/training sector under review as being in a state of progressive 'decline' and advanced 'crisis', characterised by, inter alia, widespread programme cessation and job losses as well as a heightened risk of further cessation, losses and provider closure.
- Although the development of the decline/crisis was causally traced over recent decades, a marked deterioration was reported for the period since completion of the 2014 Consortium project.
- Within this context, it was posited that, in the period under review, unmet learner demand for community-based women's education/training in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland had significantly increased across a plethora of contrasting disciplines, levels and learner cohorts.
- This reported variegated increase in unmet demand ran along a continuum from demand for: (i) unaccredited and non-vocational provision, such as recreational, motivational and personal development opportunities, deemed of particular assistance in helping to address the relationship between women's educational disadvantage and constrained well-being; through to (ii) demand for accredited vocational variants more consistent with progression pathways to further education/training and/or employment, deemed of particular assistance in helping to address the relationship between women's educational disadvantage and economic exclusion.
- Learner cohorts identified as most affected by the reported variegated increase in unmet demand were similar in kind to those identified as most affected by perceived underprovision in the 2014 project, i.e., different kinds of educationally disadvantaged, isolated and excluded individuals with quite specific and often complex learning needs, including vulnerable individuals in poverty marginalised in multiple ways, such as ethnic minority women (especially, asylum seekers and immigrants); lone parents; older women; and, women with mental ill-health, particularly conflict-associated conditions.

Common themes

- Discussions underlined the importance of community-based women's education/training in helping to address this complexity of learner need, precisely by endeavouring - through integrated service delivery - to accommodate educational need *in conjunction with other related needs* that can particularly impede marginalised women's access to learning, most notably, childcare, self-development and other poverty associated factors.
- Correlations were subsequently anecdotally posited between (i) the potential of such integrated provision to effect remedial change at the level of the individual by, inter alia, enhancing women's well being and prospects of economic participation; and, (ii) its consequential potential to help improve developmental outcomes at the level of the wider family, the community and society at large.

Reported explanations for perceived unmet demand

- Provider respondents cited a plethora of sustainability phenomena - significant loss and lack of funding, particularly, although not exclusively, statutory variants, and associated significant loss and lack of resource capacity - as major explanatory factors underlying the reported increase in unmet learner demand following the 2014 project.
- In addition, across all engagement processes, a strong correlation was posited between the reported unmet demand and the reported dearth, in affected areas, of appropriate accessible childcare support (free/affordable) to enable marginalised women to avail of learning opportunities.
- In large part, the reported sectoral decline/crisis and correlated unmet demand, for the period under review, were perceived as intrinsically linked to a cited longstanding 'bias' at the level of adult education policy development and budgetary decision-making in the jurisdiction.
- Broadly, that perceived bias was characterised in terms of sustained and deliberate government prioritisation of further education - as the preferred site of adult education - *at the direct expense and neglect of community-based variants, as the 'poor relations' of adult education*. Such bias was identified as having ultimately secured the hegemonic positioning of the former.

- Against this backdrop, it was judged that, over recent decades, government had manifestly failed to properly recognise and take full account of the particular education/training needs and interests of educationally marginalised and isolated women in deprived and rural areas.
- The most widely cited example of such perceived bias for the period under review encompassed controversial government decision-making in respect of the 2014-2020 European Social Fund (hereafter, ESF) programme. It was held that government had neglected to maximise the potential of ESF to properly recognise and accommodate the specific learner needs and interests of the aforementioned educationally disadvantaged cohorts, whose prospects of enhanced well being and outcomes through learning were judged intrinsically reliant on the community-based provision at hand.

Reported remedial action

- Given these reported provider explanations for unmet demand, it followed that provider proposals for remedial action were, in the main, both fiscally and statutorily framed, broadly articulated in terms of effecting substantive change to funding behaviour, policy and practice in the public sector at large; to include: actions to address the cited strong associations between the reported sectoral decline, rising unmet demand, government bias, ESF decision-making and dearth of appropriate childcare for affected prospective learners.
- These proposals informed an appeal for a government sea change in respect of adult education policy in the jurisdiction, posited in terms of: (i) a requirement to challenge the assumed preferential status and treatment of further education, and therein deliver substantive remedial change to the reported status quo; precisely by, (ii) properly recognising and accommodating the sector at hand as a 'vital resource' in collaborative public sphere social justice efforts to remedy the adverse implications of educational disadvantage, at the level of the individual and beyond..

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

Recommendations

Cross-departmental approach and improved equality outcomes

- Government should develop an effective cross-departmental approach at the level of policy development, implementation, monitoring and review, to properly identify and address the complex, variegated and specific learning needs of marginalised and vulnerable women in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction, including multiply disadvantaged cohorts. This undertaking should explicitly include interrogation of claim-making in respect of the reported adverse impact on learner needs fulfilment of the ESF controversy - and correlated statutory bias - cited above.
- Furthermore, such an approach should be properly informed by the collation of pertinent gender disaggregated equality data on access to adult education and lifelong learning in the jurisdiction; and, to that end, government should commit to addressing existing gaps in such data.¹³
- Moreover, in pursuit of improved equality outcomes and better targeting of variegated learner needs, the development of any such approach should also be properly informed by meaningful stakeholder engagement, and underpinned by a wider strategic commitment to operationalise equality responsive budgeting across all associated policy processes and section 75 categories.¹⁴
- Rural: finally, in all of this, due regard should be given to the social justice imperative to ensure robust rural proofing, articulated as a commitment to the development of equality responsive delivery and monitoring mechanisms that take due cognisance of the particular interacting barriers to learning affecting women in rural isolation and poverty, especially longstanding infrastructural inadequacies linked to patterned public underinvestment in rural.¹⁵

¹³ These gaps were noted in the midterm review of the current gender equality strategy; OFMDFM, 'Gender equality strategy 2006-2016 review', OFMDFM/NISRA: Belfast, 2013.

¹⁴ S. Quinn, 'Equality responsive budgeting', ECNI: Belfast, 2013.

¹⁵ See, M. Allen, 'Rural isolation, poverty and rural community/farmer wellbeing - scoping paper', Research and Information Service Briefing Paper, NIA: Belfast, 2014. It is noteworthy that participants in the 2014 project had attributed perceived unmet rural demand to longstanding rural/urban statutory resourcing differentials across the sector at hand, captured as 'historic underinvestment' in rural areas. For a recent diagrammatic overview of urban/rural differentials in the regional distribution of

Proper recognition and accommodation

- Government should take appropriate remedial steps to help safeguard the future of the sector at hand, precisely by properly recognising and accommodating the latter's positioning as a 'vital resource' in collaborative public sphere social justice endeavours to help address disadvantage at the level of the individual and beyond.
- Government should also take more seriously the role of publicly supported (low cost/no cost) pre-school childcare in facilitating the learning of marginalised and vulnerable women in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction, ensuring it takes full remedial account of planned changes to such support, including the scheduled cessation of DSD 'emergency' funding for women's centres' childcare (the Women's Centre Childcare Fund, hereafter WCCF).¹⁶

Executive funded community-based women's education/training, see DSD/OFMDFM, 'Review of government funding for women's groups and organisations', DSD/OFMDFM: Belfast, 2012, p.32. As this research puts it: 'compared with levels of government funding to women's groups in urban areas, there was a relatively low level of government funding to rural women's groups', *ibid.*, p.13.

¹⁶ The fund is currently in place until the end of March 2017.

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' of Northern Ireland, defined as deprived and rural areas.¹⁷ More precisely, the programme sought to 'serve the needs of marginalised and isolated women'¹⁸ in these areas by 'enabl[ing] them to tackle disadvantage and fulfil their potential in overcoming the barriers that give rise to their marginalisation [a]nd experience of poverty and exclusion'.¹⁹

The Women's Regional Consortium is funded under this programme, and the brief for this qualitative research project originated, and was formulated, within this policy context. That brief is as follows: to undertake small-scale qualitative follow-up research to a 2014 Consortium project on women's perceptions of gaps in community-based women's education/training²⁰ in deprived and rural areas, specifically in respect of perceived unmet learner demand among educationally disadvantaged, marginalised and isolated cohorts.

Development of the follow-up project was prompted by escalating mobilisation²¹ within the community-based women's education and training sector subsequent to the first project, characterised by claim-making suggestive of a significant increase in the kind of unmet demand under review.

1.2 Aims, objectives and scope

The overall aim of the follow-up project entailed an exploration of the aforementioned claim-making from the perspectives of the same kind of affected cohorts as comprised the subject of the first project, i.e., both educational providers and prospective learners in deprived and rural areas. More specifically, the aim was to

¹⁷ DSD/OFMDFM, *op. cit.*, p.43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.41.

¹⁹ DSD/NISRA, 'Regional support for women in disadvantaged and rural areas: survey of women's groups analysis', DSD/NISRA: Belfast, 2013, p.3.

²⁰ Recall that such provision may be broadly characterised as education/training for women by women in women-only community spaces aimed at addressing the diverse learning needs of educationally disadvantaged cohorts. Feeley, *op. cit.*, pp.iii-iv.

²¹ *Supra* note 11 pertains.

explore – and capture in snapshot format - what both perceived²² as the nature of unmet demand in the period since completion of the 2014 project.

Three research objectives pertain:

- to examine the notion of community-based women’s education/training, specifically as localised - context-specific - responses to the particular learner needs of marginalised, educationally disadvantaged and isolated women in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction;
- to capture affected cohorts’ perceptions of the nature and explanation of any unmet demand for such provision, in the period since completion of the first Consortium project on this subject in 2014; and,
- to formulate recommendations for policymakers and implicated others aimed at addressing ramifications of the project findings.

Scope

To reiterate, the research brief of this small-scale project delimit its scope specifically to capturing and analysing what two kinds of affected cohorts perceive as unmet demand for the provision at hand. As such, the paper is not intended to proffer any kind of empirical evaluation (comprehensive or otherwise) of whether any perceived unmet demand is in fact ‘actual’ unmet demand, or to map the geographic distribution of any actual unmet demand. These are potential questions and subjects for further (quantitative) research in this underexplored area of the literature.

1.3 Methodology

The project employed a mixed methodological approach, combining desktop research with focus group, interview and survey engagement as follows.

To capture the experiential knowledge and perceptions of the aforementioned affected cohorts on the subject at hand, the following were facilitated:

²² So, as noted, the focus is explicitly on women’s *perceptions* of gaps. Any empirical evaluation/testing of this claim-making to establish/quantify ‘actual’ gaps is beyond the space and remit of this brief paper.

- three focus groups, convened in Belfast and Derry during January 2016 by WSN and Women's Centre Derry, which included engagement with providers of community-based women's education/training;
- a series of interviews with prospective learners conducted by FWIN in Derry during January 2016; and,
- an e-questionnaire survey of women's centre educational providers, undertaken by WSN in February 2016.

Women at a local level not directly involved in such provision were first asked for their views on whether additional delivery was required for marginalised, educationally disadvantaged and isolated individuals in their localities. Answering this question in the affirmative prompted exploratory discussion on whether, and, if so, how, unmet demand for such provision had changed in the period since completion of the 2014 project.

By contrast, although providers were also asked the question of perceived unmet demand, in this case answering in the affirmative prompted exploratory discussion, not only about the follow-up question outlined above but also about why their organisations could not accommodate such demand.

The appendix provides further detail on all engagement.

1.4 Layout

To theoretically frame the project and explore the context within which community-based women's education/training has tended to manifest itself in the jurisdiction, we begin in Section 2 by briefly examining the notion of such provision. To that end, the section will consider the nature of the relationship between women's educational disadvantage and structural inequality, the impact of such disadvantage on individuals' everyday lives and the emergence of such provision as localised - context-specific - responses to such disadvantage. As a follow-up project, the paper draws on the theoretical framing of its predecessor and Section 2 will therefore, by and large, reproduce that framing. An evaluation of the research engagement dimension of the project follows in Section 3, capturing the perspectives of both

prospective learners and providers. The paper then concludes in Section 4 with a summary of the project's key findings and the policy recommendations they inform.

Section 2 Framing the project, setting the context

2.1 Introduction

This section builds on the widely accepted interpretation of community-based women's education/training as localised - context-specific - responses to women's variegated experience of educational disadvantage,²³ exploring briefly the context within which such provision has tended to manifest itself in the Northern Ireland case.

We will therefore focus on such provision specifically as comprising divergent localised responses to variegated educational need,²⁴ which (i) can be associated with structurally generated educational disadvantage as well as other interacting, mutually affecting gender inequalities; and, (ii) aims at capacity building to effect multifaceted remedial change at the level of the individual and beyond: at the level of the household, the community and society at large.

2.2 Structural inequality and women's educational disadvantage

This sub-section briefly examines the nature of the relationship between structural inequality and women's educational disadvantage, with a particular emphasis on the Northern Ireland context.

Variation in community-based women's education/training may be associated with the impact of the specific structural context within which such provision evolves, including differences in how communities can tend to respond to women's experiences of structurally generated educational disadvantage.²⁵ Accordingly, in order to explore more fully the notion of community-based women's

²³ WERRC, 'At the forefront: the role of women's community education in combating poverty and disadvantage in the Republic of Ireland', Aontas, Dublin, 2001.

²⁴ As the 2014 project affirmed, although this provision is first and foremostly about addressing educational disadvantage, in accommodating the diversity of learner need among marginalised and isolated women in deprived and rural areas, it can involve learner engagement across a range of prior attainment, from little/no attainment through to third level qualification.

²⁵ Clearly, such diversity also reflects a more fundamental characteristic: educationally disadvantaged women in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, do not constitute either a homogeneous or fixed group. Rather, they are differentiated by key demographic factors such as age, level of educational achievement, ethnicity and geographic location, which in combination can give rise to different learner 'constituencies'. Each of these constituencies is characterised by specific and evolving learner needs, interests and perspectives. Where delivery agents seek to meaningfully and effectively address such heterogeneity in need, the inevitable outcome is heterogeneity in provision.

education/training in the Northern Ireland case, it is useful to first review the context-specific structural relationships that have helped shape its emergence and evolution. As we shall see, the latter include complex interactions between structural factors associated with conflict and post-conflict conditions, as well as ongoing society-wide gender inequality that cuts across the private and public spheres.

As research affirms, women in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland can experience different kinds of marginalisation, exclusion, isolation and vulnerability.²⁶ These experiences can involve distinct forms of educational disadvantage, characterised by difficulties affecting access to, retention within, and progression from, formal educational and training processes.²⁷ The nature and extent of such educational exclusion can obviously vary from individual case to case; in the more severe cases, it can result in affected cohorts having 'little or no qualifications'.²⁸ The factors of structurally generated gender inequality and disempowerment underlying these experiences of educational disadvantage can tend to be mutually affecting, comprising complex interactions between a plethora of socio-economic, cultural, political and legal phenomena.

To begin with, because socio-economic status can be a key determinant of educational outcomes,²⁹ girls and women from poorer backgrounds may be at particular risk of educational disadvantage. That risk may then be augmented by cultural factors underlying the gendered division of labour in the private sphere, most notably, the socially ascribed role of women as primary care givers and domestic labourers, which can impede participation, retention and progression in education precisely by placing a disproportionate unpaid work burden on women.³⁰ Research on the Northern Ireland case evidences this correlation by identifying inadequate childcare as a fundamentally enduring barrier to the participation of socio-economically disadvantaged women in education/training across the jurisdiction.³¹

²⁶ On this, see McLaughlin, *op. cit.*; Hinds *op. cit.*; and, PWC, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Feeley, *op. cit.*

²⁸ PWC, *op. cit.*, p.ii.

²⁹ Includes, for example, outcomes in literacy levels, qualification and grading. Lynch and Baker, *op. cit.* See also, D. Hirsch, 'Experiences of poverty and educational disadvantage', JRF: London, 2007, p.1.

³⁰ See, for example, R. McQuaid, H. Graham and M. Shapira, 'Child care: maximising the economic participation of women', Equality Commission Northern Ireland: Belfast, 2013.

³¹ *Ibid.* See also, McLaughlin, *op. cit.*

Such experiences of exclusion may, in turn, be compounded by the impact of conflict and post-conflict associated factors on women's well-being, including their mental health. For instance, research indicates that the 'burden' of conflict associated anxiety and depression can tend to fall disproportionately on women,³² and that socio-economically disadvantaged women 'are at a greater risk of depression compared to less disadvantaged women'.³³

Finally, these experiences of marginalisation may be yet still further complicated by non-recognition and non-accommodation in the public sphere of minority status, needs and interests.³⁴ So, for example, educational disadvantage may be more pronounced among Traveller cohorts.

From this perspective, 'the more equal societies are in economic and social terms, the greater the likelihood there is of having gender equality in education'³⁵ and, consequently, women's educational disadvantage in the Northern Ireland case, as beyond, may be best understood and potentially remedied in the context of wider social justice discourses around equality, human rights and substantive structural-institutional-normative change.

2.3 Impact of educational disadvantage on women's everyday lives

So far, we have examined the nature of the relationship between structural inequality and women's educational disadvantage in the Northern Ireland case. We turn now to a brief exploration of the different ways in which such disadvantage may constrain women's life chances and outcomes.

Patterned structural educational disadvantage of the kind under review can produce and reproduce inequalities that adversely impact women's everyday lives on at least

³² M. Tomlinson, 'The trouble with suicide mental health, suicide and the Northern Ireland conflict: a review of the evidence', DHSSPSNI: Belfast, 2007.

³³ M. Teychenne, K. Ball and J. Salmon, 'Educational inequalities in women's depressive symptoms: the mediating role of perceived neighbourhood characteristics', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Dec: 9(12): 4241-53, 2012.

³⁴ K. Lynch and M. Feeley, 'Gender and education (and employment): gendered imperatives and their implications for women and men: lessons from research for policy makers', European Commission: Brussels, 2009, p.7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.8.

three interacting levels. First, at the level of the individual, such disadvantage can impede personal development, disrupting processes of self-actualisation, self-esteem and self-confidence, while reinforcing experiences of social isolation and disconnectedness.

Second, such disadvantage can contribute to the exclusion of women from the public sphere, constraining their agency, life chances and outcomes in respect of, inter alia, social mobility, lifetime earnings, status, health and well-being. In large part, this is because educational attainment, and the personal development it may confer, can fundamentally impact women's economic participation/independence, affecting the likelihood and nature of employment, including sustainable employment, career progression and occupational mobility.³⁶ Work in itself can also, of course, potentially contribute to personal development,³⁷ so that educationally disadvantaged women who have been unable to access personal development opportunities through education may subsequently be denied access to such opportunities through employment.

Research affirms that this relationship between educational attainment and economic participation/independence may contribute to educationally disadvantaged women becoming 'trapped in a cycle of welfare dependency and isolation'.³⁸ Accordingly, it has been suggested that opportunities for education/training can comprise the '*principal catalyst*' for women's increased economic participation.³⁹ Research in fact indicates that increased economic participation and independence for women associated with access to education/training opportunities may be viewed as 'key factors in ensuring women's full participation *at all levels of society*',⁴⁰ including, not only civil society at the level of community, but also, wider society. On this view, educational disadvantage may be associated with the exclusion of women from key associational sites such as community development/engagement processes as well as their exclusion and under-representation in public life, 'across

³⁶ S. Leitch, 'Leitch: review of skills, prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills: final report', HMSO: London, 2006.

³⁷ Lynch and Baker, op. cit.

³⁸ Patterson and Dowd, op. cit., p.121.

³⁹ C. Lidell, 'The caring jigsaw: systems of childcare and education in Northern Ireland', Save the Children: Belfast, 2009, p.28.

⁴⁰ Patterson and Dowd, op. cit., p.121.

all major positions of political, economic, social and judicial power' and decision-making sites,⁴¹ including peace-building processes.⁴²

Clearly, the ultimate inherent danger in such gendered public sphere exclusion is that some women's agency might become totally restricted to the realm of the private sphere, first and foremostly characterised in terms of assumed role of 'economically inactive', unpaid primary care giver/domestic labourer. Women who participated in the methodological processes underpinning this project highlighted this potential danger, anecdotally evidencing how educationally marginalised women in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction can become disempowered in conditions of enduring welfare dependency and isolation.

Finally, research also indicates that women's educational disadvantage can adversely impact family outcomes. For instance, it has been observed that such disadvantage can impact later child outcomes by reducing women's aspirations for their children's educational attainment,⁴³ since low attainment among children from poorer backgrounds may impact disadvantage '*well into* adulthood'.⁴⁴ This is suggestive of an inter-generational dimension to the relationship between educational disadvantage and economic marginalisation, according to which 'the relationship between poverty and low achievement ... is part of a wider cycle in which family disadvantage is passed on from one generation to the next'.⁴⁵

2.4 Aims of provision: responses to educational disadvantage

In sum, it has been argued that the educational disadvantage experienced by some women in deprived and rural areas across Northern Ireland, associated with multiple structural forms of marginalisation and exclusion, can potentially hold adverse outcomes not only at the level of the individual, but also the family, the community and society at large. These conditions can, in turn, generate local constituencies of educational need that may be associated with the imperative to effect positive change and outcomes at each of these levels. This sub-section briefly considers how

⁴¹ M. Potter, 'Review of gender issues in Northern Ireland', 2014, OFMDFM: Belfast, p.2.

⁴² On this, see Hinds, op. cit.

⁴³ Lidell, op. cit.

⁴⁴ Hirsch, op. cit., p.3.

⁴⁵ Loc. cit.

community-based women's education/training provision in such areas may be characterised as attempting to respond to, and accommodate, that variegated need.⁴⁶

Differing aims – differing needs

The aim of community-based women's education/training provision may vary depending on the specific learning need to which it responds, and the kind of intended remedial change associated with realisation of that need. Responding to need associated with delivering positive change at the level of the individual, the aim of such provision may be set out in terms of personal development and self-actualisation, addressing self-esteem and self-confidence issues associated with marginalisation, while also promoting the capacity for critical reflection. There may also be a concomitant emphasis on the social aspect of such provision, in terms of its potential to address social disconnectedness among marginalised and isolated women.⁴⁷

As previously implied, such provision may also be developed with associated intended remedial outcomes beyond the level of the individual: whether at the level of household, community or wider society. In responding to educational need associated with effecting change at the level of the household, the aim of such provision may be some kind of family support, whether, say, in terms of programmes in parenting or nutrition; or, it may instead be indirectly aimed at contributing to positive family outcomes by enhancing women's prospects of economic participation.

Where provision seeks to respond to educational need associated with effecting change at the level of the community, its aims may be characterised in terms of community development. Of course, in the Northern Ireland case as beyond, that aim may be variously interpreted depending on practitioners' contrasting positions on

⁴⁶ It is important to note that the emergence of such provision may also be viewed as explicitly responding to the 'inaccessibility' of further education for particular groups of women, associated with such barriers to women's learning as course, childcare and travel costs. On this view, community-based women's education/training addresses learner needs that 'go unmet in the statutory sector' and ultimately seeks to 'ease/maximise' educationally disadvantaged women's access to, retention within, and progression from, educational and training processes; Feeley, *op. cit.*, at p.34, p.xiii and p.69. We revisit this important point later.

⁴⁷ On this, see, for example, B. Loughran, 'Evaluation of year 3: Regional Women's Centres Learning Partnership Project, 1st May 2011 to 30th April 2012', RWCLPP: Belfast, 2012.

the purpose of community development/education, as mediated through competing ideological discourses.⁴⁸ For instance, for some providers the aim of education for community development has been essentially conflict-framed, posited in terms of fostering 'good' community relations while, for others, it has instead been innately geared more to the promotion of structural objectives posited in the language of equality, social justice and participative democracy.⁴⁹

Finally, where provision aims to effect remedial change at the level of wider society, its ambitions may be articulated in terms of advancing the participation of women in public sphere processes that ultimately extend beyond the local. A case in point is capacity building provision in the jurisdiction aimed at stimulating increased participation of women within peace-building processes. As things stand, the latter is, of course, innately constrained by the failure of the Northern Ireland government to fully implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), which 'promotes women's protection, participation, and leadership in the full spectrum of peace-building processes'.⁵⁰ As research rightly suggests, mainstreaming the resolution in policies and programmes could potentially help remedially address such exclusion,⁵¹ and the need for capacity building on this front persists.⁵²

Such education for conflict transformation ultimately seeks to prepare women to contribute to the development of more just, democratic and accountable political arrangements and social institutions.⁵³ At the same time, community-based women's education/training in the context of both conflict and post-conflict Northern Ireland has, of course, also aimed at mitigating conflict experience at the level of the individual, including the impact of conflict on women's well-being, most notably their mental health.

⁴⁸ See, T. Lovett, C. Clarke and A. Kilmurray, *Adult education and community action*, Croom Helm: London, 1983; also, Feeley, op. cit.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ C. O'Rourke and K. McMinn, 'Baseline study on UNSCR 1325 - women and peacebuilding toolkit: sharing the learning', Transitional Justice Institute: Belfast, 2014, p.15. See also Hinds, op. cit.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.18. United Nations' reporting on the United Kingdom's record on women's rights from the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has highlighted this ongoing exclusion, restating the human rights case for government action to remedially address same. UN, 'CEDAW: Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland', UN: Geneva, 2013.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ C. O'Rourke, 'Dealing with the past in a post-conflict society: does the participation of women matter? Insights from Northern Ireland', *William and Mary Journal Women and Law*, 35, 2012.

It has been suggested that the aims of community-based women's education/training in the Northern Ireland case are neither discrete nor mutually exclusive; and that, instead, these aims can interact with and cut across each other, therein producing hybridised aims and outcomes. Consequently, as observed, the positive change that such provision may potentially effect at the level of the individual may, in turn, potentially effect positive change at the level of the household, the community and society at large. So, for instance, what counts as education for personal development may also count as education for community development. As with the 2014 project, participants in the data collection processes that informed this paper anecdotally evidenced these benefits.

In sum, community-based women's education/training provision in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction can tend to respond to different types of locally identified learner need correlated to educational disadvantage, thereby potentially contributing to different types of capacity building at the level of the individual, the household, the community and society at large. And, responding to such diversity⁵⁴ in learner need invariably stimulates diversity in provision.

No guarantees

As noted in the 2014 project, there are, of course, no guarantees that community-based women's education/training will fulfil any of its stated aims, whether at the level of the individual, household, community or wider society. In large part, this is because, as we have seen, educational disadvantage is structurally generated. And, as such, the ambition to effectively tackle it and its implications ultimately calls for structural remedies to the multiple aspects of disadvantaged women's lives that correlate with educational marginalisation.

⁵⁴ Two concluding points of clarification are in order on the nature of this diversity. First, as previously implied, such diversity can include engagement with a range of prior learner attainment: while some learners may have little or no qualifications, others might instead have third level attainment. So, for example, participants in the 2014 project anecdotally outlined the case for additional provision to accommodate unmet learner demand among rurally isolated graduate cohorts with mental health issues. Second, given the diversity in provider perspective across the women's sector, such provision may or may not be explicitly posited in distinctly feminist discourse and critique: '[the sector reflects] a wide range of viewpoints, from feminist ... to those with a more traditional approach'; DSD/OFMDFM, op. cit., p.14. Thus, although such provision, broadly understood, clearly has 'strong roots in the women's movement', as well as in community development and adult education discourses, there is a marked 'variation in the degree of radicalism' among delivery agents; Feeley, op. cit., p.25; p.26.

On this reading, the potential of community-based women's education/training to remedially address the variegated impact of educational disadvantage on women's everyday lives is inherently restricted. A brief illustration should help illuminate this point. The effectiveness of such provision, as potential progression pathways to increased economic participation, will fundamentally depend on the kind of structural realities that prevail for each individual learner following her educational experience. More precisely, it will depend on the nature of the labour market and, in particular, the availability of the kind of job opportunities that could potentially help guard against the risk of in-work poverty, by proffering a genuine 'living wage' and some kind of job security, as opposed to the kind of low-pay, low-status, low-skilled and temporary jobs of which the United Kingdom has 'a large number ... compared to other developed countries'.⁵⁵

2.5 Section summary

This section aimed to theoretically frame the project and set out the context within which community-based women's education/training has tended to manifest itself in the Northern Ireland case. As we have seen, such provision may be broadly characterised in terms of divergent community responses to locally identified educational need; such need is associable with women's educational disadvantage and other interacting structural gender inequalities; and, such responses can tend to aim at mitigating that disadvantage to effect different kinds of remedial outcomes, whether at the level of the individual, the household, the community or wider society.

Within this context, it has been emphasised that 'the more equal societies are in economic and social terms, the greater the likelihood there is of having gender equality in education';⁵⁶ and, consequently, women's educational disadvantage in the Northern Ireland case, as beyond, may be best understood and potentially remedied in the context of wider social justice discourses around equality, human rights and substantive structural-institutional normative change.

⁵⁵ K. Schmuecker, 'Future of the UK labour market', JRF: London, 2014, p.1.

⁵⁶ Lynch and Feeley, *op. cit.*, p.8.

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

Perceptions of unmet learner demand since 2014 project

3.1 Introduction

This section captures and analyses the perceptions of cohorts living and working in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland that engaged in the project's focus group, interview and survey processes. Recall that the subject of that engagement was perceived changes to unmet demand in such areas for community-based women's education/training among educationally disadvantaged and isolated individuals; or, more specifically, changes perceived as having occurred in the period since completion of the 2014 Consortium predecessor project. As with the latter, participants in the follow-up project fell into two broad cohorts: those who were involved in the delivery of such education/training; and, those who were instead, in some way and to some extent, affected by the reported unmet demand as prospective learners.⁵⁷

As previously noted, as we shall see, there was a significant degree of thematic correspondence between the substance of these perceptions and the substance of those captured in the 2014 project.

3.2 Nature of perceived unmet demand

Provider participants universally depicted the education/training sector under review as being in a state of progressive 'decline' and advanced 'crisis', characterised by, inter alia, widespread programme cessation and job losses as well as a heightened risk of further cessation, losses and provider closure.

This reported decline/crisis was associated with the imposition of severe constraints on the collective capacity of the sector to address the effects of educational disadvantage at the level of the individual and beyond. Although the development of the cited decline/crisis was causally traced over recent decades, a marked deterioration was reported for the period since completion of the 2014 Consortium project.

⁵⁷ I say 'affected' in so far as this unmet demand may impact not only the women themselves, i.e. prospective learners, but also, in consequence, their families, local communities and wider society.

Within this context, it was posited that, in the period under review, unmet learner demand for community-based women's education/training in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland had significantly increased across a plethora of contrasting disciplines, levels and learner cohorts.

Learner cohorts identified as most affected by the reported variegated increase in unmet demand were similar in kind to those identified as most affected by perceived underprovision in the 2014 project, i.e., different kinds of educationally disadvantaged, isolated and excluded individuals with quite specific and often complex learning needs, including vulnerable individuals in poverty marginalised in multiple ways, such as ethnic minority women (especially, asylum seekers and immigrants), lone parents, older women and women with mental ill-health, particularly conflict-associated conditions.

This reported variegated increase in unmet demand ran along a continuum from demand for: (i) unaccredited and non-vocational (i.e. recreational, motivational and personal development) provision, deemed of particular assistance in addressing the relationship between educational disadvantage, constrained well-being and complexity of learner need; through to (ii) demand for accredited vocational variants more consistent with progression pathways to further education/training and/or employment, deemed of particular assistance in addressing the relationship between educational disadvantage, economic exclusion and complexity of learner need. The case was underscored for unaccredited provision in respect of vulnerable 'hard to reach' women, including those with mental ill health, for whom participation in accredited programmes might only be practicable after initial participation in tailored, unaccredited personal development programmes.

Discussions underlined the importance of community-based women's education/training in helping to address this complexity of learner need, precisely by endeavouring, through integrated service delivery, to accommodate educational need *in conjunction with other - poverty and gender inequality correlated - needs that can particularly impede marginalised women's access to learning*, such as childcare and self-development factors. Delivery proffered under the women's centres' operational model was universally cited as an exemplar of such integrated provision.

The latter affords a 'holistic' approach to learning, in accommodation of this complexity, precisely by integrating the delivery of education/training and childcare with a plethora of other essential frontline women-only services, including advice and advocacy.

Subsequent correlations were anecdotally posited between (i) the potential of such integrated provision to help effect remedial change at the level of the individual - positively impacting agency, life chances and outcomes - by, inter alia, stimulating self-actualisation processes and enhancing economic participation; and, (ii) its consequential potential to help effect remedial change at the level of the wider family, the community and society at large.

Alternative education/training settings not proffering such localised integrated provision - most notably, further education variants - were consequently categorised as essentially unable to take due account of this complexity of learner need; and, as a result, affected cohorts were, in turn, categorised as essentially disinclined and unable to engage with such settings. Research affirms the latter, observing that the emergence of the integrated provision at hand may be viewed as community actors *explicitly* responding to the 'inaccessibility' of further education for particular groups of women, associated with such barriers to women's learning as course, childcare and travel costs.⁵⁸

3.3 Reported explanations and remedial actions

To aid further understanding of the above claim-making, providers were asked to identify, first, the main factors that prevented their organisations from addressing the reported unmet demand and, then, potential remedial actions to address these factors. Responses to both questions are discussed below

3.3.1 Reported explanations

Provider respondents cited a plethora of sustainability phenomena - significant loss and lack of funding, particularly, although not exclusively, statutory variants, and associated significant loss and lack of resource capacity - as major explanatory

⁵⁸ Feeley, op. cit., p.34; p.xiii and p.69

factors underlying the reported sectoral decline/crisis, and correlated increase in unmet learner demand, for the period under review. Across all engagement processes, a strong correlation was also posited between reported unmet demand and a lack of accessible, appropriate (free/affordable) statutorily supported childcare in affected areas, such as might enable marginalised women to more readily avail of learning opportunities.

In large part, this reported relationship between sectoral decline, sustainability difficulties and rising unmet demand for the period under review was perceived as intrinsically linked to a cited longstanding 'bias' at the level of public sector programming, policy development and budgetary decision-making. Broadly, that perceived bias was characterised in terms of sustained and deliberate government prioritisation of further education - as the preferred site of adult education - *at the direct expense and neglect of community-based variants, as the 'poor relations' of adult education*. This bias was identified as having ultimately secured the hegemonic positioning of the former. On this view, it was judged that, over recent decades, government had manifestly failed to properly recognise and take full account of the particular educational/training needs and interests of educationally marginalised and isolated women in deprived and rural areas.

The most widely cited example of such perceived bias for the period under review encompassed controversial and contested government decision-making in respect of the 2014-2020 ESF programme.⁵⁹ It was held that government had (i) 'unfairly' relied on ESF capacity to 'shore up' holes in the budgeting of further education (a sector deemed already well provided for statutorily); while, at the same time, (ii) neglecting to maximise the potential of ESF capacity to properly recognise and accommodate the specific learner needs and interests of the aforementioned marginalised cohorts, whose prospects of enhanced well being and outcomes through learning were judged innately reliant on the community-based provision at hand.

Most notably, providers critiqued the capping of ESF support at lower level programming, deemed of 'negligible benefit' in facilitating progression pathways for

⁵⁹ On this, see, WRC, op. cit.

such cohorts to further education/training and/or employment. Prospective learners were similarly critical; as one discussant put it: 'government [is] telling women that they need to get back to work... [but] only providing [lower level programming] will not achieve this' (Women's Centre Derry focus group). Another summarised the resultant dilemma thus: 'having no [ESF] progression opportunity ... has created a stumbling block for women' seeking to enhance their prospects of economic participation through learning (Women's Centre Derry focus group). Correlated difficulties in learner recruitment to such lower level provision were subsequently noted. Recruitment difficulties were also associated with the ESF requirement that prospective learners in receipt of certain welfare benefits complete certain statutory forms as a precondition of course participation.⁶⁰

Other ESF factors⁶¹ judged controversial and indicative of government 'bias' against the sector at hand included a prohibitively resource-intensive bureaucratic compliance burden, the application of which was categorised as 'punitive' in the case of resource-constrained smaller providers typical of the sector but, conversely, 'entirely manageable' by larger, 'resource rich', further education providers (WSN focus group).

In tandem, these ESF - and other cited - explanatory factors were judged to have 'severely' constrained collective provider capacity, in the sector at hand, to meaningfully and effectively address the effects of educational disadvantage at the level of the individual and beyond.

3.3.2 Reported remedial action

Given the nature of provider explanations for the perceived unmet demand, it followed that provider proposals for remedial action were, in the main, both fiscally and statutorily framed, broadly articulated in terms of effecting substantive change to funding behaviour, policy and practice in the public sector at large.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ These included the following: the ESF teaching qualification stipulation, which was associated with tutor recruitment difficulties given 'prohibitive' cost and time implications; and, an ESF associated increase in staff stress levels.

A plethora of related remedial government actions to take account of the question of constrained sectoral sustainability consequently emerged, including: integrated measures to address the cited associations between rising unmet demand and ESF decision-making; as well as: the removal of match funding stipulations in statutory funding competitions; the establishment of a 'dedicated budget line for the sector' at programme and cross-departmental levels; the appointment of a community sector ombudsman or 'government champion' to represent the case for community-based education; provision for new learner-centric funding distribution models, to challenge the 'block funding' of further education;⁶² and, an appeal for long termism and core funding in statutory provision.⁶³

Against this backdrop, it was further proposed that, as it takes forward the childcare strategy, government should give due consideration to accommodating the particular childcare needs of vulnerable and marginalised prospective women learners in disadvantaged and rural areas, to include the safeguarding and extending of provision under the women's centres' integrated delivery model. The social justice case for ensuring budgetary compensation for the planned 2017 cessation of WCCF was consequently underscored.

Policy innovation aimed at more effective and meaningful job creation was also called for, to better enable learner progression to employment at course completion. As one discussant put it: 'government need[s] to create real employment opportunities for women... women are encouraged to undertake education/training to get the skills for employment, but there are no jobs once they qualify' (Women's Centre Derry focus group). As with the 2014 project, the point was consequently underscored that government should focus its job creation efforts on promoting particular kinds of jobs: sustainable opportunities that help guard against the risk of

⁶² Broadly, the idea was that a specific 'education budget' should be allocated to each learner, thereby enabling enhanced learner agency and choice in respect of budgetary distribution; in effect, in the projected scenario, the prospective learner would select a provider and course to which her 'budget' would then be allocated. Such reconfigured distribution was associated with the facilitation of a more tailored approach to the accommodation of learner needs and interests.

⁶³ Of course, as noted in the 2014 project, government has already set out its case against such long termism. Its recent review of women sector funding made that case by emphasising that, in a context of extended austerity, it '*will be important for women's groups to explore new ways of achieving sustainability*' through social economy model income generation and diversification. DSD/OFMDFM, op. cit., p.20.

in-work poverty for women by proffering a genuine living wage and some form of medium-to-long-termism, as opposed to low paid, low level, sporadic and precarious opportunities, typically concentrated in the service and retail sectors and populated by women.

Taken together, these proposals formed a wider appeal for a government sea change in respect of adult education policy and funding in the jurisdiction, posited in terms of a social justice imperative to challenge the assumed preferential status and treatment of further education, and therein to deliver substantive remedial change to the reported status quo. The intended outcome of this proposed sea change was thus articulated in terms of (i) proper recognition and accommodation of the sector under review, as a 'vital resource' in collaborative public sphere efforts to remedy the adverse implications of educational disadvantage at the level of the individual and beyond; and, (iii) proper recognition and accommodation of the complex learner needs and interests of educationally disadvantaged cohorts in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction.

3.4 Section summary

This section sought to articulate the perspectives of women living and working in deprived and rural areas across Northern Ireland on the question of unmet demand for community-based education/training - among educationally disadvantaged and isolated individuals - specifically in the period since completion in 2014 of the first Consortium project on this subject. As observed, unmet demand, which was identified as having significantly increased in this period, cut across a myriad of contrasting disciplines, levels, intended outcomes and cohorts, reflecting diverse learner needs, interests and perspectives. As further observed, the reported causal factors and remedial actions in respect of this perceived unmet demand were, in the main, statutorily and fiscally framed.

Following on from this claim-making, the paper concludes in the next section by laying out some recommendations to take account of these findings.

Section 4 Conclusion

This brief paper focused on providers' and affected women's perceptions of unmet demand for community-based women's education/training in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland. In so doing, the paper aimed to capture perspectives on the apparent nature of such demand in the period since completion in 2014 of a Consortium project that shared this analytical focus.

Drawing on the theoretical framing of the 2014 project, we have explored the notion of community-based women's education/training specifically as variegated localised responses to educational disadvantage, which seek to effect remedial change at the level of the individual and beyond.⁶⁴ It has been emphasised that such disadvantage is a structurally-culturally generated phenomena - correlated to gender inequalities in both the private and public spheres - that can ultimately only be properly addressed through *substantive* remedial normative-structural change that traverses both spheres.

As we have seen, a significant increase in unmet demand was reported for the period under review, which cut across a plethora of contrasting levels, disciplines, intended course outcomes and learner profiles. As we have also seen, providers have ascribed their inability to address this reported unmet demand to a sector-wide decline/crisis, which was, in large part, associated with apparent government neglect of the sector and concomitant bias toward further education. And, a government sea change in respect of adult education policy in the jurisdiction was subsequently called for, such as might challenge the cited hegemonic positioning of the latter in statutory discourse on, and fiscal commitment to, adult education and lifelong learning.

Additional research is clearly required on the subject at hand, to help clarify the precise nature, extent and explanation of actual unmet demand, as well as its potential impact on outcome realisation at the level of the individual and beyond.

⁶⁴ Feeley, *op. cit.*

These observations and conclusions have informed the formulation of a number of policy recommendations. These recommendations are set out below following a summary of the project's key findings, which, as noted, indicate a degree of thematic convergence with the 2014 project.

Summary of findings

Nature of perceived unmet demand

- Provider participants universally depicted the education/training sector under review as being in a state of progressive 'decline' and advanced 'crisis', characterised by, inter alia, widespread programme cessation and job losses as well as a heightened risk of further cessation, losses and provider closure.
- Although the development of the decline/crisis was causally traced over recent decades, a marked deterioration was reported for the period since completion of the 2014 Consortium project.
- Within this context, it was posited that, in the period under review, unmet learner demand for community-based women's education/training in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland had significantly increased across a plethora of contrasting disciplines, levels and learner cohorts.
- This reported variegated increase in unmet demand ran along a continuum from demand for: (i) unaccredited and non-vocational provision, such as recreational, motivational and personal development opportunities, deemed of particular assistance in helping to address the relationship between women's educational disadvantage and constrained well-being; through to (ii) demand for accredited vocational variants more consistent with progression pathways to further education/training and/or employment, deemed of particular assistance in helping to address the relationship between women's educational disadvantage and economic exclusion.
- Learner cohorts identified as most affected by the reported variegated increase in unmet demand were similar in kind to those identified as most affected by perceived underprovision in the 2014 project, i.e., different kinds of educationally disadvantaged, isolated and excluded individuals with quite specific and often complex learning needs, including vulnerable individuals in

poverty marginalised in multiple ways, such as ethnic minority women (especially, asylum seekers and immigrants); lone parents; older women; and, women with mental ill-health, particularly conflict-associated conditions.

Common themes

- Discussions underlined the importance of community-based women's education/training in helping to address this complexity of learner need, precisely by endeavouring - through integrated service delivery - to accommodate educational need *in conjunction with other related needs* that can particularly impede marginalised women's access to learning, most notably, childcare, self-development and other poverty associated factors.
- Correlations were subsequently anecdotally posited between (i) the potential of such integrated provision to effect remedial change at the level of the individual by, inter alia, enhancing women's well being and prospects of economic participation; and, (ii) its consequential potential to help improve developmental outcomes at the level of the wider family, the community and society at large.

Reported explanations for perceived unmet demand

- Provider respondents cited a plethora of sustainability phenomena - significant loss and lack of funding, particularly, although not exclusively, statutory variants, and associated significant loss and lack of resource capacity - as major explanatory factors underlying the reported increase in unmet learner demand following the 2014 project.
- In addition, across all engagement processes, a strong correlation was posited between the reported unmet demand and the reported dearth, in affected areas, of appropriate accessible childcare support (free/affordable) to enable marginalised women to avail of learning opportunities.
- In large part, the reported sectoral decline/crisis and correlated unmet demand, for the period under review, were perceived as intrinsically linked to a cited longstanding 'bias' at the level of adult education policy development and budgetary decision-making in the jurisdiction.

- Broadly, that perceived bias was characterised in terms of sustained and deliberate government prioritisation of further education - as the preferred site of adult education - *at the direct expense and neglect of community-based variants, as the 'poor relations' of adult education*. Such bias was identified as having ultimately secured the hegemonic positioning of the former.
- Against this backdrop, it was judged that, over recent decades, government had manifestly failed to properly recognise and take full account of the particular education/training needs and interests of educationally marginalised and isolated women in deprived and rural areas.
- The most widely cited example of such perceived bias for the period under review encompassed controversial government decision-making in respect of the 2014-2020 ESF programme. It was held that government had neglected to maximise the potential of ESF to properly recognise and accommodate the specific learner needs and interests of the aforementioned educationally disadvantaged cohorts, whose prospects of enhanced well being and outcomes through learning were judged intrinsically reliant on the community-based provision at hand.

Reported remedial action

- Given these reported provider explanations for unmet demand, it followed that provider proposals for remedial action were, in the main, both fiscally and statutorily framed, broadly articulated in terms of effecting substantive change to funding behaviour, policy and practice in the public sector at large; to include: actions to address the cited strong associations between the reported sectoral decline, rising unmet demand, government bias, ESF decision-making and dearth of appropriate childcare for affected prospective learners.
- These proposals informed an appeal for a government sea change in respect of adult education policy in the jurisdiction, posited in terms of: (i) a requirement to challenge the assumed preferential status and treatment of further education, and therein deliver substantive remedial change to the reported status quo; precisely by, (ii) properly recognising and accommodating the sector at hand as a 'vital resource' in collaborative public

sphere social justice efforts to remedy the adverse implications of educational disadvantage, at the level of the individual and beyond..

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

Recommendations

Cross-departmental approach and improved equality outcomes

- Government should develop an effective cross-departmental approach at the level of policy development, implementation, monitoring and review, to properly identify and address the complex, variegated and specific learning needs of marginalised and vulnerable women in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction, including multiply disadvantaged cohorts. This undertaking should explicitly include interrogation of claim-making in respect of the reported adverse impact on learner needs fulfilment of the ESF controversy - and correlated statutory bias - cited above.
- Furthermore, such an approach should be properly informed by the collation of pertinent gender disaggregated equality data on access to adult education and lifelong learning in the jurisdiction; and, to that end, government should commit to addressing existing gaps in such data.⁶⁵
- Moreover, in pursuit of improved equality outcomes and better targeting of variegated learner needs, the development of any such approach should also be properly informed by meaningful stakeholder engagement, and underpinned by a wider strategic commitment to operationalise equality responsive budgeting across all associated policy processes and section 75 categories.⁶⁶
- Rural: finally, in all of this, due regard should be given to the social justice imperative to ensure robust rural proofing, articulated as a commitment to the development of equality responsive delivery and monitoring mechanisms that take due cognisance of the particular interacting barriers to learning affecting

⁶⁵ As previously observed, these gaps were noted in the midterm review of the current gender equality strategy. OFMDFM, op. cit.

⁶⁶ Quinn, op. cit.

women in rural isolation and poverty, especially longstanding infrastructural inadequacies linked to patterned public underinvestment in rural.⁶⁷

Proper recognition and accommodation

- Government should take appropriate remedial steps to help safeguard the future of the sector at hand, precisely by properly recognising and accommodating the latter's positioning as a 'vital resource' in collaborative public sphere social justice endeavours to help address disadvantage at the level of the individual and beyond.
- Government should also take more seriously the role of publicly supported (low cost/no cost) pre-school childcare in facilitating the learning of marginalised and vulnerable women in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction, ensuring it takes full remedial account of planned changes to such support, including the scheduled cessation of DSD 'emergency' funding for women's centres' childcare (WCCF).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Supra note 15 pertains.

⁶⁸ As noted, the fund is currently in place until the end of March 2017.

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Appendix

Summary: focus group, interview and e-questionnaire engagement

(i) Focus groups

- WSN facilitated event with providers of community-based women's education/training, convened at its Belfast premises: 21 January 2016.
- Women's Centre Derry facilitated event with providers, convened at its Derry premises: 25 January 2016.
- Women's Centre Derry facilitated event with affected women (prospective learners), also convened at its Derry premises: 28 January 2016.

(ii) Interviews with affected women: undertaken by FWIN 11-22 January 2016.

(iii) Women's centres' provider e-questionnaire: sent to 14 regional women's centres in February 2016.⁶⁹

(iv) Participating organisations, other than event partners mentioned above

- Aware NI
- Belfast Interface Project
- First Steps Women's Centre
- Lenadoon Community Forum
- Lenadoon Women's Group
- Shankill Women's Centre
- Strathfoyle Women's Centre
- Waterside Women's Centre
- Windsor Women's Centre
- Women's Tec

(v) Participants' profile summary

Overall composition: included venue staff, service providers and users and, more generally, women living and working in different rural, urban and town sites, including parents, young and older people.

⁶⁹ Atlas Women's Centre; Ballybeen Women's Centre; Chrysalis Women's Centre; Falls Women's Centre; First Steps Women's Centre; Footprints Women's Centre; Greenway Women's Centre; Kilcooley Women's Centre; Magherafelt Women's Centre; Shankill Women's Centre; Strathfoyle Women's Centre; Waterside Women's Centre; Windsor Women's Centre; and, Women's Centre Derry.