

A Response to the consultation document -

Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland

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**Patricia Haren
Director
Women's Support Network
Floor 2
109 – 113 Royal Avenue
Belfast
BT1 1FF
Email: co-ord@womenssupportnetwork.org**

Introduction

The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an umbrella organisation for more than 40 community-based women's centres, women's projects and women's infrastructure groups. The WSN aims to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network also aims to strengthen the collective voice for women's groups, to promote and develop networking to enable collective action and to influence policy and decision making processes. The WSN is an important vehicle for taking forward the common agenda of community-based women's organisations, many of which are based in the most disadvantaged areas of the city and which have experienced the worst effects of the political conflict.

Belfast Women's Centres are major providers of education classes for women. In the years 1995-2000, approximately 8,000 women were enrolled in training and education classes in the various centres, taking a wide range of accredited courses, from pre-vocational to university level and also taking non-accredited courses. We continue to believe strongly that non-accredited courses must also be provided for those who do not wish to take, or are not yet ready for, more formal education and training.¹ While the women's sector has amassed evidence of the achievements of community-based women's education and learning initiatives funded through EU programmes and other sources, there has been little official recognition of this work. We welcome this opportunity to respond to the 'Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland' consultation and in doing so, to demonstrate the importance of the contribution made by the women's sector to lifelong learning.

¹ Ruth Taillon, *The Social and Economic Impact of Women's Centres in Greater Belfast*, Research Report for the Women's Support Network, Belfast, 2000, p.49.

Creating Learning Partnerships

The Women's Sector has long called for learning partnerships between the community-based women's education sector and the further education sector. In her preface to research funded by the Equality Commission for NI and managed by the Women's Resource and Development Agency, the Chief Commissioner acknowledged the importance of the work of the 'diverse and vibrant women's sector' in providing opportunities to return to learning:

Women's community education offers thousands of women a chance to gain confidence, qualifications, and new experiences. Many of these women move on to higher education, jobs, or to participation in voluntary or community organisations.²

Research carried out by the Civic Forum into educational disadvantage recommended an increased role in local learning provision be given to the community-based women's sector. The report favoured the development of interagency partnerships and called for core funding for the women's sector, in recognition of its contribution to adult learning strategies.³

Life skills and essential skills

We are disappointed by the over-emphasis on vocational skills within the 'Skills Strategy' and the lack of any recognition of the wider benefits of learning. We believe that the lack of recognition of community education will have detrimental consequences for the future development of education and training as those currently 'hard to reach' in terms of education will no longer have that means of

² Maggie Feeley, *Making Good Learning Partnerships*, ECNI and WRDA, April 2002.

³ *Can Do Better: educational disadvantage in the context of lifelong learning*, Northern Ireland Civic Forum September 2002.

entry. The women's sector offers courses in a large range of essential skills, such as literacy, numeracy and ICT, family literacy and a range of vocational skills, for example in alternative therapies. The location of centres in the heart of neighbourhood communities has meant that they have been able to engage with those unwilling to approach the formal FE sector. In addition, the women's sector has a trained cohort of community facilitators who could also be used to deliver on such 'employability skills' as problem solving, team working and flexibility. Community facilitators are ideally placed to help build confidence and support people back into learning.

The experience of the Women's Centres affiliated to the WSN in providing facilities for a wide range of users has helped to develop a deep understanding of the varied needs of different groups of women. Our belief is that life values other than skills development are important in education. For example, centres have put on classes like crafts and baking which can be accessed by those with limited knowledge of English. In such circumstances, integration and the development of multi-cultural understanding is more important than accreditation. Courses like 'Anger management' do not lend themselves to accreditation, yet they fulfil a vital function in the lives of those who take them. It is deplorable that such classes, due to the lack of government support, can only be run through surplus funding from EU funding measures.

Northern Ireland cannot be considered simply as a society with a low skills base. There must be recognition of factors specific to a society coming out of conflict and a strategy that includes initiatives to overcome the legacy of conflict. The International Labour Organisation itself acknowledges that training in post-conflict societies cannot be confined to employment and business activities, 'life skills training is vital in a post-conflict-situation, as it addresses skill gaps which

impede the economic (re)integration of those affected by the conflict.⁴ Personal development and empowerment must be part of a holistic approach to improving the skills of our people. Above all, there must be a concerted effort to go out to areas of disadvantage, rather than to expect people who have been failed by the education system to enter an unfamiliar environment without any first stage preparation. The *Skills Strategy* document ignores the reality of Northern Ireland and fails to recognise and include the confidence building role of voluntary and community activity and the skills that women in particular have demonstrated in developing high quality and relevant adult education.

Women's educational initiatives

Belfast Women's Training Services

In 1993 the eight women's centres formed Belfast Women's Training Services, a consortium that has been successful in providing pre-vocational training and support services for women wishing to return to the labour market. In 2000, BWTS provided 200 training places for women each term for courses, which have received accreditation through the Open College Network. A highly positive evaluation of BWTS concluded that its effective model of community-based training was accessible to women for the following reasons:

Locally based training: the provision of training in local women's groups/centres has given women an opportunity to learn in safe, non-threatening, informal and supportive environments...

Childcare: On-site, high-quality childcare is provided during each course. BWTS has recognised that childcare is one of the main barriers facing women who want to return to education or training...

⁴ Quoted in Michael Potter, *Women, Civil Society and Peacebuilding: paths to peace through the empowerment of women*, Training for Women Network, June, 2004, p.27.

Finance: Free courses have made BWTS training accessible to women on low incomes...⁵

It is a matter of concern that funding difficulties have meant that BWTS is closing down in March 2005. There is a crucial need for a provider of first stage, community-based education. Without that, substantial numbers of women will never gain the confidence to progress to more formal learning.

WEAVE

WEAVE (the Women's Enterprise and Vocational Education) project, was set up in north Belfast in 2002, running a programme focusing on face-to-face pre-enterprise support to women in a manner that acknowledges the traditional problems of weak entrepreneurship in NTSN areas of north Belfast. Support has been provided to over 40 women to date. WEAVE enables women to progress onto Business Start Training and half of the participants of the last course moved to mainstream training. Vitality, the outreach programme of WEAVE has enabled it to target women that are traditionally difficult for government agencies to reach. What is of concern to WEAVE is that the proposals being put forward by DEL would appear to remove the outreach value of community education, once again marginalising women who will otherwise never have the opportunity to avail of training. The experience of WEAVE is that the years of conflict have had a detrimental effect upon those living in north Belfast and special measures are necessary to help people out of the poverty trap.

Non-traditional skills training for women

We are concerned to note that there is no gender breakdown in the figures given (para 3.14) for the Modern Apprenticeship programme. We would hope that when the skills strategy is being put into operation it will be accompanied by

⁵ Quoted in Taillon, p.40.

positive action measures to increase the proportion of women accessing non-traditional skills training. The women's sector has valuable experience in this area and we are ready to contribute to any review of the Modern Apprenticeship system. We ask, what are DEL's plans to develop women's skills?

In response to the difficulties for women in accessing training for non-traditional skills the Windsor Women's Centre spearheaded an initiative which eventually resulted in the establishment in 1997 of the Women's TEC – Women's Training, Education and Childcare – providing training in a range of non-traditional skills. Included within the provision is childcare for trainees and personal development. Recognition of the differing needs of women and men in accessing training in these areas is vital if women are to achieve success. For example, following a study tour in America, it was reported that training for women in road building and construction sites included an initial training period 'to prepare them emotionally for working with men' and correct training to improve their upper body muscles so that they could compete with men in carrying heavy objects.⁶ Gender sensitive training must be included in the skills strategy if it is to make a difference to the lives of women and we believe that the woman-friendly environment offered by women's training services plays a vital part in terms of developing good practice that should be emulated by all training providers.

Education and childcare

Resources for women's education have come from social welfare strategies to address poverty and social exclusion. We have stated in the past our disappointment that government fails to give due recognition to the work of women's centres and women's groups in providing an holistic service for women and their children, providing integrated childcare and education, early learning, childcare, including education for children with special educational needs, and

⁶ Windsor Women's Centre, *Annual Report 1996/7*, quoted in Taillon, p.45.

other family support services.⁷ We continue to iterate our conviction that New Deal is not an appropriate framework for the adequate training of childcare workers. Obtaining funding for childcare worker training continues to be a major difficulty for centres, who would urge strongly for core funding for childcare. We emphasise the importance of affordable good quality childcare as a basic prerequisite for women who wish to return to education or training. Women's Centres fund-raise for this to be part of programme costs but have considerable difficulty in obtaining funding. The current situation is extremely worrying as all 7 centres in the Greater Belfast area are facing the prospect of closing their childcare services by March 2005. This will have serious repercussions for both staff and for users of the centres. It will have a detrimental impact on the future provision of education classes.

Promoting the acquisition of skills

While we welcome the support that is to be given to the growing number of migrants in the workforce through ESOL courses, we would point out that not all migrants are in the workforce. For example, foreign wives of residents of Northern Ireland are often at home, either looking after children or at home because they lack the confidence to enter the work force. Windsor Women's Centre is a provider of English classes to a variety of people from different ethnic backgrounds. The classes are given in a less intimidating environment than that of an FE college and their existence is also important in terms of promoting good relations in the community. We would urge DEL to include such provision within its strategy.

Similarly, in relation to approaches to family literacy and numeracy, we ask the Department to include the work undertaken by women's centres as it considers approaches to dealing with this issue. It is largely mothers who help with

⁷ Taillon, p.88.

children's homework and they are most easily approached through the wide range of women's networks that exist throughout Northern Ireland. Many women, who have begun by accessing education purely through a desire to be more effective in helping their children, have then gone on to study on their own behalf.

Community education and the FE sector

The WSN believes that a skills strategy limited to the acquisition of vocational skills has resource implications that will be detrimental to the achievement of a culture of life-long learning. There must be recognition that a place for non-accredited education remains an important aspect in educational provision. Many women do not wish to be in the labour market while they are caring for their children, yet should be entitled to education and skills training. In addition, there must be affordable and good quality childcare so that all women can have access to whatever type of education they wish to avail of.

As it stands, there is a danger that the skills strategy will not reach those living in areas of disadvantage. There is no commitment to deliver in New TSN areas. A concentration of delivery via FE colleges will exclude many, particularly those without access to transport, the majority of whom are women. Community-based education works through its ability to reach out to those often termed 'hard to reach'. It is often deliberately cross-community in a way that much FE provision is not. Partnerships between community-based education and the FE sector can be fruitful, both in enabling people to progress and in helping to identify the areas of education and training most wanted. Without continued and better resourced funding for community education that link will be lost, to the detriment of the entire education and training sector.

We are therefore seriously concerned that the emphasis on the delivery of accredited courses through Further Education Colleges will have the consequence of marginalising many women, who need the woman-centred ethos of the women's centres to support them in the early stages of returning to education. While many women's centres do have partnerships with local FE colleges, there must be recognition of the work of those providing capacity-building support and a commitment to resource those providing that initial experience of education. In addition, there is a serious difficulty with regards to the limited and expensive childcare available to those studying within the FE sector, as evidenced by the childcare provided by BIFHE.

The WSN believes that for a skills strategy to be accessible and meaningful to the wide variety of life experiences of women and men its implementation must include the following:

Recognition of the importance of non-accredited education as a 'first step' in the take-up of education.

Service agreements between community providers and government for provision of community-based education.

A commitment to deliver skills training in New TSN areas.

DEL funding for vocational training that takes place in women's centres and other community-based centres as well as in FE colleges.

Government funding for childcare linked to participation in classes.

Additional support for women accessing non-traditional skills training to include financial support for women's training centres and positive action to ensure women take up apprenticeship places traditionally regarded as 'male only'.

Government support for family literacy and numeracy classes based in women's centres.

Conclusion

The women's sector has a unique and valuable contribution to make in working in partnership with government in delivering adult learning and training for employment. We urge DEL to consider the role that can be played by the community sector as stakeholders in the development and delivery of skills strategy for Northern Ireland.

Appendix 1

WSN Member groups

Al-Nisa Women's Group
Ardoyne Women's Group
Ashton Centre
ATLAS (Lisburn)
Ballybeen Women's Centre
Ballymurphy Women's Centre
Belfast Travellers Education & Development Group
Brook (Belfast)
Citywide Women's Consortium
Derry Women's Centre
East Belfast Community Education Centre & Walkway Women's Group
Falls Women's Centre
Footprints Women's Centre
Greenway Women's Centre
Lenadoon Women's Group
Lesbian Advocacy Service Initiative
Northern Ireland Women's European Platform
Parenting Forum NI
Shankill Women's Centre
South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP)
Strabane & Lifford Women's Group
Windsor Women's Centre
Women's Information Group
Women into Politics
Women's News
Women's Resource Development Agency
Women's Tec