

A Response to the consultation document -

**Gender Matters: towards a cross-
departmental framework to promote
gender equality for women and men
2005 - 2015**

February 2005

**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 witnessed the worst effects of the political conflict.

Context

The daily experiences of our members in working to transform the lives of women and their families in situations of acute economic deprivation is one of constant uncertainty in terms of obtaining the necessary resources to continue our work. In March 2005 the women's centres in the Greater Belfast Area are faced with total closure, as a consequence of delays in awarding neighbourhood renewal funding. In addition, the childcare facilities within the centres face closure because of the changes in peace funding. We have awaited the development of a gender equality strategy with great interest, in the hope that such a strategy would lead to an understanding by government of the importance of the work of the women's voluntary and community sector and the need for adequate resourcing to be made available. We are disappointed that 'Gender Matters' fails to reflect the needs of women in working class areas of Northern Ireland and fails to provide any sense that it has the potential to develop a strategy to achieve the empowerment of women.

WSN was part of the pre-consultation process initiated by OFMDFM and at that time we made it plain that we believed that the exclusion of women's multiple identities was a mistaken strategy. Issues raised then have not been taken into account in the writing of this document and the WSN wishes to make it plain that it does not endorse the strategy contained in 'Gender Matters'.

WSN worked in partnership with the WRDA on the GES consultation process. WSN set up the seven GES workshops with all of the key women's centres in Belfast, promoted them to the membership and took part in each consultation, alongside the centre users. The sessions were facilitated *by* WRDA facilitators and funded by OFMDFM. While we welcomed the opportunity this gave to consider issues contributing to the promotion of gender equality and we have the highest regard for the skills of the community facilitators, who worked hard to make a confusingly-ordered document more accessible, we have to place on record the fact that we do not believe the issues selected for discussion and comment by 'Gender Matters' are necessarily those that are the most relevant for the women involved in the Women's Support Network. While OFMDFM will receive direct reports from each facilitated consultation session, this response from WSN provides an overview of the entire process from the perspective of our membership. It aims to provide some understanding of the issues the WSN believe must be addressed and incorporated into a strategy that is explicit in eliminating discrimination, tackling disadvantage and creating the means whereby equality of outcome rather than a meaningless 'equality of opportunity' can be measured.

At the conclusion of each consultation session there was unanimous agreement that the only strategy that could make real change was one that focused directly on women – including older women, minority ethnic women, Traveller women, lesbian women, disabled women and women of different religious and political

beliefs and class background. It would also need clear targets and indicators and with sufficient resources to make a difference to women's lives.

Key action areas

Consultees were asked to comment on the 'key action areas' highlighted in 'Gender Matters'. There was a reluctance to prioritise as many of the areas were regarded as being equally important. At the same time, people felt that the presentation of these key areas ignored the reality of life in working class neighbourhoods in a society that is still emerging from thirty years of conflict. The action areas could not be regarded in isolation but had to be placed in the context of New TSN and the reality of living in situations of multiple deprivation. A robust anti-poverty strategy had to be incorporated.

Employment/gender pay gap/entrepreneurship

The reality of low pay and the double burden of home and work experienced by many women must be recognised. In areas like West Belfast, with endemic male unemployment, many women were family breadwinners, and many women had low paid part-time work as hospital cleaners or in call centres. They also had to struggle with inadequate childcare and the reality that the bulk of domestic arrangements still remained their responsibility. The issue of 'choice' (p.68) ignored this reality and failed to consider the structural barriers that limit women's access to employment. It was felt that much more consideration needed to be given to issues concerning flexibility in work, so that men could be positively encouraged to take more responsibility for children.

Tax credits, the problems of low pay and the poverty gap, the loss of benefits if working, were all vital issues for women in terms of achieving economic independence.

Women entrepreneurs made the point that there are still only 5% of women in entrepreneurial positions and that they were in traditionally female areas. While they welcomed recent government initiatives to encourage entrepreneurship they asked for more promotion of such schemes so that they would be more widely available.

The term 'economically inactive' was rejected as a patriarchal concept that not only ran counter to the reality of women's lives, but was a dangerous concept in that it supported attitudes that prioritised the male breadwinner and the subordinate housewife. Women felt that it discounted the economic worth of their contribution in maintaining the family and the future and present workforce. It was said that society needed to put more value on the work that women do and that boys needed to be taught to respect the work of women.

Childcare/eldercare/caring role

Everyone felt that society placed little value on the caring role and placed little value on carers themselves. 92% of lone parents are women and statistics show that lone parents are more likely to be in poverty. Lone parents are quite clear on what help they require in terms of childcare, tax credits, etc and urge the government to consult with them when they develop policy. Even though government policy was for 'care in the community', the evidence is that this was not resourced and the example was given of the lack of resources for those with mental health problems.

Pensions

Many issues were raised in relation to women and pensions: the fact that women live longer; that they will receive only a portion of their husband's pension if he dies before them; the fact that many women have no independent pension; that low wages mean women cannot afford to pay into a stakeholder pension; the benefit trap of having a pension and losing entitlement to benefits. While

OFMDFM do not have the power to change policy over pensions, much of the problem lies with the women's economic dependency on men. Understanding this and developing a strategy to empower women would in the long term have an effect upon the pensions issue.

Education/lifelong learning

Despite statistics showing girls doing better than boys in school, the continued discrepancy in wages paid to men and women show that all occupations are not open equally. There was some discussion of the professions, and the male domination of certain areas, for example, in the medical profession; women are rarely seen by female doctors in hospitals. Girls needed to have equal access to all parts of the school curriculum and professional training needed to have the flexibility that would allow for family life as well as career advancement.

Throughout the consultation process, the uncertain nature of funding for the women's sector meant that there was a large degree of disillusionment in discussing many issues. The education classes provided in the centres have been an essential part of the lives of many women, for the knowledge gained, for the companionship and the childcare and for many, for the opportunities that education provided. There is an urgent need for core funding so that such classes can continue. Women valued the woman-centred ethos of the centres and many would not access classes if they were in FE settings.

Housing/homelessness

The housing shortages in north and west Belfast were big issues for many. The lack of social housing has led to an increase in rents in the private sector, with young people being forced to move back to living with their parents. Seven-year waiting lists were common. Repossession rates were increasing as people struggled to cope with mortgages. Heating allowances paid into accounts that were in the man's name was a common practice and one that again reinforced women's dependency. It was hoped that a Bill of Right would stress the

importance of the right to a house and thereby encourage an increased provision of affordable housing and social housing.

Health and well being

Reproductive and sexual health is crucial to all women and the lack of any mention of reproductive health from the document is a crucial omission. How can there be a strategy for equality for women if that strategy ignores the issue of reproductive rights? Women need better provision for sexual and reproductive health. We urge the establishment of well-woman centres and call on the government to allow women in Northern Ireland the same right to choose abortion as an option as women have in the rest of the UK.

Young people must have better sex education in schools, which should be mandatory in all schools.

The assertion that fewer men consult their doctor than women is one that we find most questionable. Most women attend the doctor because of pregnancy or because they are bringing a child to the doctor. In our experience, it is the woman in the house who is most likely to discount her own health as she puts the needs of others first.

Emotional well-being is an important issue for women. It has been calculated that one effect of the 'troubles' was to increase the consumption of tranquillisers in Northern Ireland to a figure well above the UK average. We believe that anti-depressants and tranquillisers continue to be too readily prescribed to women, so that medical conditions can be misdiagnosed due to gender stereotyping on the part of the medical profession. In addition, the therapeutic value of complementary medicine continues to be ignored, although our experience in providing many alternative therapies within our centres has demonstrated their value in alleviating stress and depression in a holistic and positive manner that enables the individual to keep control of her life.

Eating disorders disproportionately affect young women, although we acknowledge that some young men are also affected. There is a critical lack of resources to help with this condition and we urge government to core fund voluntary organisations working with those suffering from eating disorders.

Well-being (including suicide)

We believe that suicide is an entirely separate issue, which deserves its own policy response. As the Children's Commissioner has recently pointed out, the lack of mental health facilities for young people is scandalous. Greater resources are also needed to help those family members bereaved by suicide.

Family diversity and parenting issues

As women make up the majority of lone parents in Northern Ireland, we believe that there must be specific attention to the needs of lone parents. There must also be action from government, from schools and from employers to encourage men to be active parents taking an equal share of parenting responsibilities. We support the rights of gay people to enter into civil registration of their relationship and urge the government to extend this to heterosexual partners.

Crime and community safety

We again would question the statistics given in 'Gender Matters'. In relation to crime it is stated that men suffer 60% of violent crime. This does not accord with the experience of women. We believe that gender-related violence should be categorised as crime.

Gender-related violence and abuse

Domestic violence as well as rape should be considered as violent crime. Mental as well as physical abuse should be recognised. It should be easier to obtain exclusion orders against violent partners and these should be rigorously

enforced. The difficulty women experience in this area means that there are occasions when women feel there is no point in seeking help.

While government support for Women's Aid is acknowledged, there must be greater resources for women's organisations working in the area of gender-based violence. One specific concern related to the position of boys aged over 14, who are unable to accompany their mothers to Women's Aid refuges. More attention should therefore be given to the needs of teenage boys, in particular, to ensure that the cycle of abuse does not repeat itself.

Representation in public life and in senior decision-making roles

We believe that affordable child-care and flexible working patterns are key issues preventing women from taking part in public life. While much attention is paid to women's supposed reluctance to come forward, less attention is paid to addressing the structural barriers that prevent women from equal participation. However, we also believe that male attitudes are also crucial in ensuring that women remain underrepresented in all areas of public and political life. As men occupy the top level of organisations, they are unlikely to give up power, or to share power willingly, so we strongly believe that there must be positive action to ensure future gender parity. As grassroots women, we are less concerned about 'senior' decision-making roles. We believe that it is important that the strategy works to ensure that women are able to participate on equal terms with men at *all* levels of public and political life. 'Gender Matters' says nothing about enforcing measures to achieve change. It remains aspirational and as such, unlikely to have any impact against the obstacles that confront women. We urge the implementation of affirmative action to achieve real change in outcome.

Conclusion - A Strategy for Women

The unanimous conclusion from the consultation process initiated by WRDA and WSN is that women do not believe the proposed strategy, which is based on women receiving equal treatment to men, can achieve equality for women.

We call on OFMDFM to reconsider their plan of action and develop a woman-focused strategy, including the multiple identities of women, based on the feedback from the consultation.

We recommend that international standards on gender equality, CEDAW and the Beijing Platform of Action, form the framework for a plan of action to achieve equality for women. These should be expanded to include UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on 'Women, Peace and Security' in recognition of the important role played by women in conflict resolution and reconstruction.

Gender mainstreaming can only be only one part of a strategy to promote gender equality. Targeting without mainstreaming will not be effective, but mainstreaming without targeting will maintain the status quo and leave inequalities unchallenged. Positive action measures to eliminate the historic discrimination suffered by women must form part of the strategy.

We believe that the strategy as it stands is overly complicated and difficult to grasp. A simplified strategy, with clear targets and with resources specified to meet those targets, would have a better chance of capturing the imagination of women and would have more chance of being implemented and monitored.

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