

**Ebonie Simpson and Taylor Calobre are American students studying Public Policy and English, respectively, at Duke University. They are interning with the Women's Support Network, as well as the Falls Women's Centre, for the summer months. Below is their experience of policy and processes within Northern Ireland.**

In our four weeks here, we've had a lovely introduction to policymaking and women's issues in Northern Ireland and the UK. We've tagged along with Ellen as she attended different meetings and, consequently, we've bombarded her with questions, like: What do we have in common with the UK government? What makes us different? What do all these acronyms stand for?! Through our bombardment of questions and many observations and experiences, we've learned quite a bit about the internal functionality of the UK Government, especially in relation to the women's sector.

Although the two nations have similar sets of issues, the UK and the US sometimes go about concerns in much different fashions. This is especially true for women's issues. We've noticed that although women in the UK are marginalized much like women in the US, the UK Government shows more willingness and desire to ameliorate the status of women. Issues such as women's rights, involvement in the workforce, violence against women, childcare and education continue to receive nonpartisan attention here, even in a recessionary period. On the contrary, women's issues are viewed in the US as a left-wing, liberal concern that should only be addressed in times of prosperity. For example, in the past few months, there has been a major conservative-led attack on women's reproductive rights in the US Congress. Conservative organizations have lobbied Republican Congresspersons to stop funding certain organizations. Nonprofits like Planned Parenthood, a national organization which provides family and parenting services, abortion services, and women's health services, had to heavily lobby and desperately rally support to keep from being completely defunded this year.

We could not imagine something like that happening here. Although we know the UK has a number of improvements to make, per reality, the UK's progressive governmental structure has really impressed us. The idea of consultations is completely foreign to American politics and citizen engagement. The US is not required to consult any organizations or citizens about its policies and initiatives at all, even if it directly affects them. Instead, policy decisions are often made based on influential (and many times wealthy) companies that lobby Congresspersons for a vote that only advantages them. Indeed, many Congresspersons listen to their constituents and vote accordingly, but the problem of dishonest lobbying significantly limits the inclusivity and effectiveness of our policymaking structure. We appreciate the UK's attempt to be inclusive and effective in its policymaking.

While we realize that the size, federal governmental structure, and the division of power in our country can explain some differences we have, take it from us: the US could definitely learn a thing or two from Northern Ireland!

# policy point



## What is CEDAW?

CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, is a landmark international agreement that affirms principles of fundamental human rights and equality for women around the world.

This United Nations (UN) treaty offers countries a practical blueprint to achieve progress for women and girls by calling on each ratifying country to overcome barriers of discrimination.

The Convention focuses on three key areas:

- civil rights and the legal status of women
- reproductive rights
- cultural factors influencing gender relations

Within each area, specific provisions are outlined. As envisioned by the UN, the Convention is an action plan that requires ratifying nations to eventually achieve full compliance with the rights and mandates described below:

- **Civil Rights and Legal Status:** Included are the rights to vote, to hold public office and to exercise public functions; rights to non-discrimination in education, employment and economic and social activities; equality of women in civil and business matters; and equal rights with regard to choice of spouse, parenthood, personal rights and command over property.
- **Reproductive Rights:** Included are provisions for fully shared responsibility for child-rearing by both sexes; the rights of maternity protection and child-

care including mandated child-care facilities and maternity leave; and the right to reproductive choice and family planning.

- **Cultural Factors Influencing Gender Relations:** To achieve full equality, the traditional roles of women and men in the family and in society must change. Thus the Convention requires ratifying nations to modify social and cultural patterns to eliminate gender prejudices and bias; revise textbooks, school programs and teaching methods to remove gender stereotypes within the educational system; and address modes of behaviour and thought which define the public realm as a man's world and the home as a woman's, thereby affirming that both genders have equal responsibilities in family life and equal rights regarding education and employment.

The UK's 7th periodic Report on CEDAW is now available. Copies can be obtained from [www.equalities.gov.uk/media/press\\_releases/uk\\_demonstrates\\_progress\\_on\\_el.aspx](http://www.equalities.gov.uk/media/press_releases/uk_demonstrates_progress_on_el.aspx). WSN will be working with NIWEP to organise an event on CEDAW. Further details will follow shortly.

The Women's Support Network is funded by the Department for Social Development, through the Voluntary & Community Unit.



If you'd like to feed in to any policy consultations contact:  
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### Community Safety Strategy:

A response was made to the Department of Justice on the strategy. The Women's Support Network held focus groups and consulted members via questionnaires to garner their views on building a safer, shared and confident community.

### Widening Participation in Higher Education:

Issued by the Department of Employment and Learning. WSN highlighted the need to see a concerted effort placed on removing barriers for women who wish to participate in Higher Education.

### Pathways to Success—NEET:

WSN responded to the strategy from DEL aimed at those Not in Employment Education or Training (NEET). A briefing paper is also available which highlights the issues and key concerns.

### Government Equalities Office—Strengthening Women's Voices:

Our main concern over this strategy is the potential for the voices of women from Northern Ireland not being heard; the assumption that broadband and internet access is available to all. We also highlighted that the important role the Women's National Commission played to ensure the voices of women from Northern Ireland were heard at Westminster.

WSN Policy responses can be downloaded from the website [www.wsn.org.uk](http://www.wsn.org.uk)



WSN is a lead partner in the Women's Centres Regional Partnership alongside The Women's Resource & Development Agency, NI Rural Women's Network and The Women's Centre Derry.

Consultation responses from WCRP this quarter have included:

- Pathways to Success NEET strategy
- Community Safety Strategy
- GEO—Strengthening Women's Voices

Full copies of the consultations can be downloaded from:

[www.wcrp.org.uk](http://www.wcrp.org.uk)

### Forthcoming consultations >>>

## Dates for your diary

The following consultation will be out soon, if you would like to feed in to these please contact Ellen, Policy & Research Co-ordinator on [policy@wsn.org.uk](mailto:policy@wsn.org.uk) or 028 9023 6923:

### Programme for Government Consultation

The long awaited Programme for Government has been drafted and is sitting with the Executive. It will be realized for consultation shortly along with the EQIA.



# WSN Policy Out & About

The Policy & Research Co-ordinator is invited to a large number of policy events, conferences and seminars. We therefore prioritise those we attend to support our diverse membership and to obtain information on the latest policy updates. The following is a list of events and conferences attended in the last quarter.

### NICVA Hustings:

NICVA held a hustings event with election candidates. WSN asked a question on funding for the community-based women's sector ensuring that we can continue to support women from disadvantaged areas.

### OFMDFM Earnings Disregard Event:

This consultation event was held at NICVA. A briefing paper was prepared and sent to all members.

### Young Life & Times

WSN policy attended the launch of the 2010 Young Life and Times Survey launch. The event was well attended and received good publicity in the press

### Launch of Women's Manifesto:

Ellen Finlay spoke on women in education at the Belfast launch of the Women's Manifesto in the Equality Commission. The event was well attended by all political parties.



### WSN Briefing Papers >>>

WSN now have briefing papers on various consultations. These are produced with key points on various policies. The following are now available.

- Earnings Disregards Pilot Study from OFMDFM
  - GEO—Strengthening Women's Voices
  - Pathways to Success—NEET strategy

## Policy Fora

WSN Policy & Research Co-ordinator attended the following policy fora over the last quarter:

### NI Rural Women's Network Policy Forum Dungannon

The meeting was jointly held with the NICVA Women's Policy Group. There was a presentation from Louise Coyle from NIRWN on policy consultations. This was followed by a focus group on the Rural White Paper.

### WCRP policy sub group on 1st February

The meeting was helpful in deciding on future responses to consultations.

### Early Years Strategic Alliance:

WSN is co-chair of this group with Children in Northern Ireland. The aim is to keep the issue of childcare at the forefront of government agenda and ensure there is sufficient funding for childcare.

### Women's Ad Hoc Policy Forum

Two meetings were attended this quarter to finalise details of the Women's Manifesto launch.

### End Violence Against Women:

A meeting was held at Women's Aid which looked at what political parties had in their manifestos on violence against women.

### Child Poverty Alliance:

This meeting is chaired by Anne Moore from Save the Children. Further work was outlined to ensure the Child Poverty Strategy is kept high on the political agenda.