



Response to Draft Budget 2011-15

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Policy Subgroup
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1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) is a partnership of four lead regional women's organisations linking with fourteen frontline women's organisations across Northern Ireland to provide support and services to women living in disadvantaged areas. (See Appendix 1)

1.2 Vision

WCRP's vision is "of communities where women are recognised and valued as equal partners working towards a future based upon shared values of equality, participation and inclusion."

1.3 Mission

WCRP's mission is "To work in partnership to support and strengthen the voice of community based women's organizations."

1.4 Background

The four key lead partners of the Partnership are the **Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)**, **Women's Support Network (WSN)**, **Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)** and **The Women's Centre, Derry**. The fourteen women's organisations are spread across Northern Ireland with seven from the Greater Belfast and Lisburn area, four in the North West and three in Dungannon, Magherafelt and Craigavon. Together the WCRP seeks to develop and strengthen a regional infrastructure which will support community based women's organisations across Northern Ireland:

- To build a strong, effective and inclusive partnership for the benefit of partners and stakeholders;
- To advocate for the sustainability of frontline services for WCRP partners and stakeholders;

- To promoting best practice and quality standards training, education, advice and childcare services in the women's centres;
- To Influence policy relating to women's lives by identifying and publicising emerging issues facing women in disadvantaged areas.¹

2.0 General Comments to all Departments

WCRP is concerned with the length of time given to the consultation period. It is good practice for a consultation of this importance to be given 12 weeks. The 8.5 week period has been totally inadequate for interested parties to respond and give due consideration to the budgets especially since this period included Christmas and New Year holidays.

Consultees should be provided with sufficient meaningful information to understand, scrutinise and comment on policies. However on this occasion the draft budgets contained inaccessible and technical jargon. The Department of Finance and Personnel's Equality Scheme states that "barriers to proper consultation will be removed by ensuring accessibility of language and appropriate formats in a timely fashion to ensure meaningful consultation."²

WCRP is seriously concerned that a full Equality Impact Assessment has not been carried out. We would stress that a High Level Impact Assessment (HLIA) is not sufficient, in itself, to discharge Section 75 duties. OFMDFM's Gender Equality Strategy highlights that "as part of the process of developing policy priorities and budgets, DFP and OFMDFM consult widely on how the budget proposals may impact on different Section 75 equality categories."³ We have particular concerns that the budgets will impact disproportionately upon women. The Fawcett Society highlights that "of the £8 billion worth of cuts to tax and welfare, 72 per cent will come from women's pockets, in comparison to 28 per

¹ <http://www.wcrp.org.uk/mission.php>

² <http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/dfpequal.pdf>, pg 7.

³ <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/genderequalitystrategy2006-2016.pdf>

cent from men's."⁴ Professor Mike Tomlinson (Poverty and Social Exclusion UK Project Queens University) suggests that the Executive could be "open to legal challenge for failing to have due regard to equality of opportunity."⁵ Section 75 imposes a statutory duty on public authorities "to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity." WCRP urges all departments to carry out thorough evidence-based impact assessments as required by Section 75.

The Council of Europe has published a handbook on Gender Budgeting and defines gender budgeting as "an application of gender mainstreaming in the budgetary process."⁶ According to the Council of Europe, gender budgeting involves three stages including analysis involving gender disaggregated data, determining the differential impact of the budget between men and women; reformulation of policies and redistribution of resources to ensure gender equality outcomes; and embedding gender equality within all budgetary processes.⁷ WCRP believes the approach highlighted in the Council of Europe's handbook is vital to ensure that equality of opportunity on the grounds of gender is embedded in the budgetary process. WCRP recommends that DFP and other government departments in their individual budgets adopt the approach published by the Council of Europe in its guidance on gender budgeting thus ensuring gender equality in budgetary processes, in this case in the draft budget 2011-15 for Northern Ireland.

A report by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) identified lack of appropriate childcare as the single biggest barrier to women's participation in education, training and work, as well as public and political life⁸. The report made a number of recommendations including the development of an integrated childcare strategy for Northern Ireland and increased provision of local, high

⁴ <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=1204>

⁵ Tomlinson, M. And Kelly, G. (2011) Poverty and Social Exclusion UK: Response to Northern Ireland's Draft Budget

⁶ Council of Europe (2009) *Gender Budgeting: Practical Implementation handbook*, Pg 5.

⁷ *Ibid*, Pg 17.

⁸ *Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation*, Women's Centres Regional Partnership, 2009.

quality, affordable and flexible childcare.⁹ The Law Centre NI also cited childcare as a barrier to employment stating that “any child poverty strategy needs to make progress in this area if the route to work is to be a meaningful route out of poverty.”¹⁰ The Law Centre NI also raised concerns during the Committee stages of the Welfare Reform Bill regarding obligations for lone parents with children aged seven or over to look for employment from 2010, given that there is no childcare strategy or childcare infrastructure in place in NI. WCRP are very concerned regarding the lack of co-operation to deal with cross-cutting strategies such as childcare funding and a childcare strategy.

We have concerns that budgets have been prepared without an agreed Programme for Government. Having the PfG in place would have provided a framework to identify priorities and where cuts and spend would be allocated. Further it is necessary to acknowledge that the effects of the recession might lead to greater need in terms of providing advice and services, etc. There could also be costs associated with withdrawing funding (e.g. the state would need to pay unemployment benefit to staff made redundant).

There is little evidence of a co-ordinated approach to the drafting of departmental budgets. Minister Alex Attwood highlighted at a recent event¹¹ his meeting with Michelle Gildernew to discuss a way of working together and made reference to “looking at funding streams to ensure those who are disadvantaged in both rural and urban areas continue to receive vital services.” Apart from this one meeting it would appear departments are competing for budgets which could lead to vital services being reduced and those who are disadvantaged bearing the brunt of the budget cuts.

⁹ *Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation*, Women’s Centres Regional Partnership, 2009

¹⁰ Law Centre NI *Working Together To Reduce Child Poverty Seminar: The Child Poverty Act 2010*, May 2010

¹¹ Spectrum 2 Event held on Thursday 10th February 2011

Conclusion

WCRP welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document. Whilst welcoming the opportunity we have serious concerns; in particular the failure of all departments to carry out a full EQIA. As you may be aware, Theresa May, as Minister for Women and Equalities, wrote a letter to remind her colleagues in the UK Government of the legal requirements to consider how certain groups would be affected by the budget of the Coalition Government. She further underlined the real risk that those same groups would be disproportionately affected by spending cuts, and advised that a collective view be taken of the cumulative impact of the cuts, to avoid widening inequality. We see no evidence of Northern Ireland Government Departments working together; rather the opposite, Departments are competing against each other which will result in serious economic hardship for those on low incomes. There also appears to be no evidence of Department's having rural proofed their budgets. Clarification is needed on how government departments are understanding and measuring 'disadvantage'. We are happy to further discuss this response if required.

Appendix 1:

Lead Organisations:

NI Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
15 Molesworth Street
Cookstown
BT80 8NX

The Women's Centre, Derry
Beibhinn House
5 Guildhall Street
Derry
BT48 6BB

Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
6 Mount Charles
Belfast
BT7 1NZ

Women's Support Network (WSN)
109-113 Royal Avenue
Belfast
BT1 1FF

Partners:

Waterside Women's Centre

170 Spencer Road
Waterside
Derry
BT47 6AH

Foyle Women's Information Network

The Junction
8 Bishop Street
Derry
BT48 6PW

The Women's Centre

Beibhinn House
5 Guildhall Street
Derry
BT48 6BB

Strathfoyle Women's Centre

12 Bawnmore Place
Strathfoyle
BT47 6XP

Atlas Women's Centre

81 Sloan Street
Lisburn,
BT27 5AG

Ballybeen Women's Centre

34 Ballybeen Square
Belfast
BT16 2QE

Falls Women's Centre

256 - 258 Falls Road
BELFAST
BT12 6AL

Footprints Women's Centre

84a Colinmill
Poleglass
Dunmurray
BT17 0AR

Greenway Women's Centre

19 Greenway
Cregagh Road
Belfast
BT6 0DT

Windsor Women's Centre

136-144 Broadway
Belfast
BT12 6HY

Shankill Women's Centre

151-157 Shankill Road
Belfast
BT13 1FD

First Steps Women's Centre

21a William Street
Dungannon
Co Tyrone
BT70 1DX

Magherafelt Women's Centre

The Learning Lodge
27-29 Moneymore Road
Magherafelt
BT45 5JE

Chrysalis Women's Centre

520 Burnside
Brownlow, Craigavon
BT65 5DE
