



# Response to Pathways to Success

Issued by: Department for Employment & Learning

June 2011

Policy Subgroup  
Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP)  
c/o 6 Mount Charles  
Belfast  
BT7 1NZ  
Tel: 028 90 23 02 12  
Email [info@wcrp.org.uk](mailto:info@wcrp.org.uk)

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

## **2.0 Introduction**

WCRP welcomes the commitment from the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) in developing this Strategy. We are particularly encouraged that DEL has taken the lead and there is strong evidence of cross-departmental working.

WCRP would welcome clarification on the age focus contained within the strategy. We agree that the Assembly Employment and Learning Committee Inquiry stated, "the Committee considers that a strategy that does not look at specific age groups will be less effective and somewhat unwieldy."<sup>2</sup> However, our understanding of the Inquiry was that the overall strategy should not focus on one particular age group but rather the interventions should be age specific. We welcome your comments on this particular issue.

The WCRP held focus groups with women from Ballybeen Women's Centre, Falls Women's Centre, Women's Centre Derry and Strathfoyle Women's Centre. The aim was to hear the views from young women living in disadvantaged areas and allow them to contribute to this consultation response. The following points were raised during the focus groups.

---

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

<sup>2</sup> [www.niassembly.gov.uk/employment/2007mandate/2010/report\\_32\\_10\\_11R\\_v1.htm](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/employment/2007mandate/2010/report_32_10_11R_v1.htm)

## 2.1 Barriers faced by young women

Young women from disadvantaged areas are at risk of entering the category of those Not in Education Training or Employment (NEET) when they face barriers in their lives. The unique barriers faced by young women raised in the focus groups are as follows:

Childcare: lack of childcare access inhibits their ability to continue education or to enter the job market. A report by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP)<sup>3</sup> 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 life. The report made a number of recommendations including the development of an integrated childcare strategy for Northern Ireland and increased provision of local, high quality, affordable and flexible childcare.<sup>4</sup> The cost of childcare is particularly restrictive for those entering the job market, especially if a parent is on low wages or in part-time work. Given that women are paid on average 10% less than men<sup>5</sup>, it is vitally important that a childcare strategy is developed in tandem with the NEET strategy.

Confidence and self-esteem issues: Some young women feel very much isolated from the education system, especially if they have become young mothers, or if they have other caring responsibilities. This can lead to a lack of confidence, low self-esteem, loss of skills and, in some cases, mental health issues. WCRP wish to highlight the important work of the community based women's sector. Women's Centres provide a holistic approach to community education, offering confidence building programmes as well as accredited training. This is coupled with the provision of childcare, family friendly class times and delivery in a caring, safe and supportive environment. Continued

---

<sup>3</sup> H McLaughlin (2009) *Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation*, Report written on behalf of WCRP, pg 37.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pages 60-61

<sup>5</sup> Office for National Statistics - <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/hub/index.html>

resources are needed for community education based in women's centres to allow the particular needs of young women and children to be met.

Rural area disadvantage: Rurality presents additional problems for young women such as distance, isolation and lack of services. The WCRP strongly recommends that this strategy takes in to consideration the additional barriers faced by those living in rural areas. By focusing only on the greatest number in a community can leave those in rural areas even more marginalized and disadvantaged.

Poverty: Around a quarter of children in Northern Ireland live in poverty.<sup>6</sup> Therefore the associated costs of training can have an impact on a young woman's decision as to whether or not to do a course. Similarly, those from rural areas find the cost of travel to access training; training placements or, indeed work, prohibitive to their participation. WCRP recommend the Educational Maintenance Allowance is maintained and those on job-seekers allowance are allowed to keep this benefit while on a course.

## **2.2 Needs of Young Women**

The needs of young women are varied and complex, no one solution fits all. For example, the Women and Work Commission (2006) noted that too many girls get poor careers advice, that gender stereotypes persist and that poor advice and guidance contributes to the persistence of gender inequalities in the workplace and lack of options for young women. They advised in 2009 that there should be training for careers advisors on challenging gender stereotyping and the establishment of a programme of best practice for delivering careers advice in a non-stereotypical way.

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.poverty.org.uk/reports/ni%202009%20findings.pdf>

In relation to vocational training for 16-17 year olds, figures over the last 6 years show a steady decline in young women's participation. 93% of young women were in further training and education in 2005/6 and this has fallen to 89% in 2009/10. At the same time, young men's participation rates have risen. In Jobskills and Training for Success courses, young men have always had between 74% and 78% of places compared to young women's share of between 22% and 26%. And this has now declined further. Also, in further education, In FE, young women only have 5% of FE Jobskills provision.

Research by Youth Action has highlighted that most training centres have predominantly male trainees and few training organizations have crèches. The preference for male-centred vocational training and lack of attention to tackling gender stereotyping makes these places very uncomfortable for young women, contributing to a dropout rate. All this should be a matter of concern to DEL.

Research by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) found that worst affected by unemployment across genders and age groups are young women with no qualifications, whose unemployment rate is 46%, an increase of nearly 18% since March 2008. If they are locked out of the labour market now, they may be locked out forever, as they take up caring responsibilities and find they have no skills and no pension.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, in order to address the barriers for young women, the WRCP calls upon the Department to:

---

<sup>7</sup> The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge, written by Bronagh Hinds for the WRDA, July 2011

- Encourage young women in to non-traditional forms of employment, such as those offered by WomensTEC<sup>8</sup>;
- Tackle gender stereotyping;
- Provide alternative forms of education and training such as the holistic approach offered by the community-based women's sector where there are smaller class sizes and childcare needs are met;
- Encourage and support women's centres to tender for the Learner Access and Engagement Programmes;
- Recognise that young women require additional support such as confidence building and motivational programmes, sometimes before they take the step in to accredited training or employment.
- Improve the quality of careers guidance and advice to young women; a more individual and holistic approach is needed to support young women to develop their potential.
- Education needs to be responsive to local community need. For example, Strathfoyle Women's Centre responded to the needs of parents whose children were going through the transition test.
- Further support parents. Parent support classes through schools and in the community would ensure parents have the skills and information to better guide their children.
- Gender stereotyping in relation to work experience needs to be addressed.
- Pay special attention to young women with no qualifications and ensure the needs of young women are included in policy formulation and service delivery to overcome educational under achievement.
- DEL should review Jobskills and apprenticeships should be reviewed and steps should be taken to open up opportunities for young women. This

---

<sup>8</sup> The WOMEN'STEC is an innovative organisation which aims to provide facilities to advance women's involvement in sectors of training and employment in the Construction and IT, and specifically women who are socially and economically disadvantaged.

should be accompanied by gender-awareness training for programme leaders and tutors.

### **2.3 Information**

WCRP agrees that a tracking system would be helpful to monitor the movement of young people through the education system; however we would like reassurances from the Department that it will be used in a responsible way. WCRP would also call for any data gathering to be gender disaggregated. This would allow for a greater analysis and evaluation of the specific barriers and challenges faced by young women. We ask DEL to include these statistics in future reporting mechanisms.

The WCRP have concerns over the recent interventions which offer young people six months training i.e. Steps Ahead Programme. The programme is very limited in that participants must be claiming benefits for 30 months or more and the training restricted to six months. This type of intervention is typically a 'churning' exercise; it does not reduce the NEET numbers but rather removes them for six months before being added in again. WCRP strongly recommend that any data mechanisms should record whether young people are re-joining programmes or are new entrants. The omission of this information is a serious weakness in designing strategies for permanently reducing the numbers of young people in the NEET category. Any strategy needs to create sustainable models that take young people through to employment.

### **2.4 Interventions**

There is a significant amount of evidence to confirm that the earlier intervention for young people at risk of being NEET takes place, the more effective it is. Interventions after a young person has left school are too late; at an earlier stage they are more disposed to engage with support, advice and guidance. Moreover,

it is far easier to re-motivate and encourage a young person when they are in school, before they have become NEET, exposed to risky behaviours or to potential offending lifestyles. It is the view of WCRP that considerably more work needs to be undertaken in school.

The community and voluntary sector has a positive track record in designing and delivering successful and sustainable education and training programmes which help in NEET reduction. The work of the Women's Centres has been particularly fruitful in this area, initially through the European Social Fund (ESF) working to target and reduce the number of young women who are NEET. The community based women's sector has been very effective at reducing NEET figures with sustainable progressions into employment or continued training or education. The women's centres will continue to play a vital role in this area. However, there is a very real danger the community based women's sector will not be in a position to maintain its current level of participation in NEET reduction work for much longer, meaning a 'drop' in the quantity of provision and an increase in those in the NEET category. Serious attention needs to be given to the funding crisis that currently exists within the voluntary and community sector.

WCRP fully support the intervention strategy however we call on the department to ensure there are a variety of interventions that can be applied at different levels throughout the life of a young woman.

## **2.5 Prevention**

Whilst WCRP recognize there is a need to focus on a specific age range, we believe the strategy should also emphasize the importance of early years. The strategy fails to recognise the role of women as primary caregivers. A research briefing published by the Department of Education highlighted that lower maternal education is associated with children's lower attainment levels in

subjects such as English and Maths and that these effects continue across primary school years. This research contrasts with lower paternal education which is also associated with lower attainment in English and Maths but the effects of these fade over primary school years.<sup>9</sup> There must be equal emphasis on prevention methods as well as intervention.

DEL must recognize the benefits the community based women's sector can bring to young women. They are a unique resource which can develop relationships with young women and respond and provide support in a way that statutory organisations cannot.

## **Conclusion**

Education must be tailored to meet the needs of young women. For young minority ethnic women this includes culturally specific and language specific education to help them access learning.

As highlighted above, the barriers faced by young women are complex and varied. When changes happen in a vulnerable young woman's life, it can have a devastating effect which can lead to a distance from the formal education and employment structures. DEL must recognize that school does not work for all young women.

WCRP believe that there is a need to really strengthen and further develop properly funded and structured work based learning opportunities and to considerably strengthen employers' commitment to and engagement with the education of young people who are not going to take up an apprenticeship route. A young person who is entering work for the first time needs to develop work

---

<sup>9</sup> Department of Education "Effective Pre- School Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Pre School Experience and Key Stage 2 Performance in English and Mathematics", Pg 2, available on [www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk)

skills and an understanding of what is expected of them and be supported. However, this is difficult as there is little job stability and fewer employment opportunities, which is a worrying development.

WCRP welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document. Whilst welcoming the opportunity we have recommended how this could be improved. 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