

WSN Briefing Paper

Strengthening Women's Voices in Government Consultation

Issued by Government Equalities Office, Westminster

Background:

The Government are seeking views on proposals to develop new methods of engaging with women and to ensure there is effective dialogue about the key issues of concern to women of all ages and backgrounds in the UK. The consultation also asks for views on challenges and priorities for women.

Policy Context:

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government abolished the Women's National Council (WNC) in 2010. The WNC was tasked with bringing the voices of women to government but have now decided to bring these functions in to the Government Equalities Office.

Government published its Equality Strategy in December 2010. Building a Fairer Britain sets out a programme of action to tackle inequalities with particular commitments:

- Introducing a new system of flexible parental leave, allowing parents to choose caring arrangements that work for them and challenging the stereotype that women will take the main share of leave when a couple has a child.
- Extending the right to request flexible working to all, encouraging a culture shift in workplaces, beyond the traditional 9-5 model of employment.
- Increasing transparency on pay, by making 'gagging clauses' in contracts unenforceable if someone suspects discrimination and working with partners to develop a voluntary approach for gender equality reporting, including pay, in the private and voluntary sector.
- A business-led strategy to increase the number of women on corporate boards, led by Lord Davies. A new aspiration that by the end of the current Parliament 50 per cent of all new appointments to public boards will be women.
- A cross-government action plan to tackle violence against women and girls, including stable funding for rape crisis centres, with money for new centres where there are gaps in provision, £28 million of funding for specialist services to tackle violence against women and girls committed until 2015.
- International work to empower and educate girls, recognising the role of women in development and delivering on the millennium development goals. Work to tackle violence against women and girls overseas, and helping to ensure that healthy mothers can raise strong children.

Key Aims of this Consultation:

The consultation aims to:

- Identify key priorities for women now and in the future
- Ensure women's voices are fed into the policy making process both domestically and internationally
- Encourage networking to share best practice to address inequality
- Be transparent about views and how the views will be taken into account.

The approaches being suggested:

The following approaches are being suggested by the Government Equalities Office:

- Direct engagement between ministers, women and organisations to ensure understanding of the issues and a two-way dialogue process
- Bring in expertise to support the new model and independence from government
- Looking ahead to anticipate issues
- The introduction of a new IT platform for engagement.

Potential Pitfalls to what is being suggested:

- By bringing these functions in to government, there is now no critical voice.
- There is a potential that any structures put in place will be London based and will not reflect the diversity of the devolved nations.
- What financial resources will be made available to ensure proper and robust engagement with women?
- Does the Government Equalities Office understand the uniqueness of devolved government and the regional variance of policy and legislation?
- How can issues which effect Northern Ireland women be feed in to the cross-departmental working group based in Whitehall?
- There is a danger that the differences in legislation across the UK could lead to a disparity of equality and rights for women.

Next Steps:

WSN will be organising focus groups to ensure the views of women are feed in to this consultation. Further details to follow:

For further Information, contact:

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