

## A Response to: A Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education

Issued by: Department for Employment & Learning

May 2011

## **Introduction**

- 1.1. The Women's Support Network (WSN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation issued by the Department of the Environment.
- 1.2 The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is a regional organisation that works across all areas of Northern Ireland. It includes in its membership community based women's centres, groups and organisations, with a concentration in disadvantaged areas. WSN is a charitable and feminist organisation, which adopts a community development approach. We provide a range of support and services to 62 community based women's centres, projects and infrastructure groups and 22 associate members drawn from across the community and voluntary sector who support women, families and communities. (see Appendix 1).
- 1.2. Our members provide a wide range of women-centred front line services across Northern Ireland, including:
  - Specialist Advice
  - Childcare and Family Support
  - Counselling, Support and Advocacy
  - Complementary Therapies
  - Training & Education
  - Health & Wellbeing Programmes
  - Personal Development & Employment Support
  - Volunteering, Leadership & Empowerment
- 1.3. WSN aims to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network aims to strengthen the collective voice of women's groups and to promote and develop networking opportunities, to enable collective action and to impact upon policy and decision making processes. WSN provides an accessible, feminist, relevant and high quality support service and resource for its member groups. The Network is also an important information resource on issues relevant to community based

women's organisations and for other infrastructure groups, nationally and internationally.

- 1.4. Over the past 30+ years, the community based women's sector has developed a range of front-line services such as childcare, support, advice, and education & training services in response to the needs they identified at a grass roots level. Women's groups continue to meet the particular needs of women and their children living in areas considered to be some of most affected by the conflict, and recognised as some of the most disadvantaged areas across Northern Ireland today.
- 1.5. Network members are actively engaged with their local communities, cross-community initiatives and regional structures throughout Northern Ireland.

## **2. Comments**

The Women's Support Network agrees that the decision to participate in higher education is influenced by a number of factors such as socio-economic background, age, gender, geography, caring responsibilities and income. Also, the aspirations and value placed on higher education can determine future employment prospects and earnings potential.

Women face many barriers to participation in Higher Education which are noted below. WSN would like to see a concerted effort placed on removing these barriers and any system that is put in place is underpinned by financial support, and is targeted to those most in need.

### **Women from Disadvantaged areas**

WSN notes the emphasis on skills as having a role to play in social inclusion. WSN wishes to bring to the Department's attention research by the Women's

Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP)<sup>1</sup> which illustrated barriers faced by women from disadvantaged backgrounds which can lead to social and financial exclusion. These include lack of access to adequate and affordable childcare, limited skills, qualifications and experience and confidence which can impede women in entering/re-entering education, training and employment.

WSN recommends the department sets out in the strategy how it will address these barriers to ensure women's full participation in economic, social and public life.

There are existing good models of practice of women taking university access courses through women's centres. The centres provide childcare, 1-to-1 support as well as help with other family responsibilities. WSN would ask that funding for community education is protected especially as all the women's centres are located in areas of disadvantage.

### **STEM subjects**

WSN recommends that DEL encourages girls and women to pursue the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) subjects. This is essential given DEL's and DE's actions and targets in the Cross Departmental Action Plan for Women 2008-2011 which has planned outcomes of challenging gender stereotypes, particularly in STEM subjects and increased uptake of STEM subjects by girls.

WSN would like to stress the need to have increased flexibility in the provision of STEM education.

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<sup>1</sup> Women's Centres Regional Partnership "Women living in disadvantaged communities: barriers to participation" (2009) available at [www.wcrp.org.uk/cms/data/upimages/Barriers\\_to\\_Participation\\_-\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.wcrp.org.uk/cms/data/upimages/Barriers_to_Participation_-_FINAL.pdf)

## **Widening participation plans for universities**

### **Early Years**

It is important to note the lifelong pattern of inequality in education and how this translates across generations of the same family.

WSN notes a research briefing published by the Department of Education which highlights 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>2</sup>

WSN recommends That DEL work with DE to consider how the introduction of an Early Years Strategy will increase and wider participation in higher education of women from disadvantaged areas.

### **Gendered career pathways**

We note from page 27 of the strategy document that you have concluded 'there was a bias toward female participation and that males were under-represented in HE.' While this may be the case, it should be noted that research shows that despite girls outperforming boys at school, fewer females are represented in science subjects. Research conducted by the Women and Work Commission notes that only 14% of engineering and technology students, 24% of computer science students, 22% of physics students, and 32% of architecture students are female. This appears to reflect NI trends as DETI statistics<sup>3</sup> show that in Northern Ireland universities, 21% of graduates in engineering and technology and 33% of science and computing subjects are female. Further Education statistics show that in relation to the total enrolments on science courses, 30% are female. By not addressing this issue could mean many women may end up in low-paid and low-skilled jobs.

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<sup>2</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)

<sup>3</sup> DETI "Women in Northern Ireland" (2010), Pg 20, available at [www.deti.gov.uk/women\\_in\\_northern\\_ireland\\_2010-3.pdf](http://www.deti.gov.uk/women_in_northern_ireland_2010-3.pdf)

WSN strongly advocate for non-gendered career advice to be given to girls and women when it comes to making choices for Higher Education, especially women from disadvantaged communities. This would be consistent with the recommendations of the Women and Work Commissions report<sup>4</sup> which calls on Department's responsible for Education and Skills in the devolved regions to 'ensure that teacher training emphasises the need to challenge gender stereotypes in the delivery of careers education and in subject teaching.'

WSN recommends that DEL collaborates with DE to work towards this aim and that the importance of non gendered careers advice is included in the strategy.

### **Retention**

WSN would welcome a detailed breakdown by gender on the retention figures and the reasons for female drop out. We feel this information would better inform the reasons for female drop out and enable structures to be put in place to limit drop out numbers.

### **Conclusion**

WSN welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document. We have offered some constructive recommendations as to how it could be improved. We are happy to further discuss this response if required.

### **For further Information, contact:**

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<sup>4</sup> Women and Work Commission 'Shaping a Fairer Future (2006)

## MEMBERSHIP 2011

|    | <u>Member Group</u>                  |
|----|--------------------------------------|
| 1  | All Ireland Mother's Union           |
| 2  | An Munia Tober (Travellers)          |
| 3  | Antrim & Ballymena Women's Aid       |
| 4  | Ardmonagh Women's Group              |
| 5  | Ardoyne Women's Group                |
| 6  | ATLAS Women's Centre                 |
| 7  | Al Nisa Women's Group                |
| 8  | Ballybeen Women's Centre             |
| 9  | Ballymurphy Women's Group            |
| 10 | Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid        |
| 11 | Belvoir Women's Improvement Group    |
| 12 | Carrickfergus Women's Forum          |
| 13 | Carew II                             |
| 14 | Causeway Women's Aid                 |
| 15 | Chrysalis Women's Centre             |
| 16 | Clan Mor Women's Group (Sure Start)  |
| 17 | Derry Well Woman                     |
| 18 | Derry Women's Centre                 |
| 19 | Falls Women's Centre                 |
| 20 | First Steps Women's Group            |
| 21 | Footprints Women's Centre            |
| 22 | Foyle Women's Aid                    |
| 23 | Foyle Women's Information Network    |
| 24 | Granaghant District Women's Group    |
| 25 | Greenway Women's Centre              |
| 26 | Kilcooley Women's Centre             |
| 27 | Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative |
| 28 | Lesbian Line                         |
| 29 | Lenadoon Women's Group               |
| 30 | Ligoneil Family Centre               |
| 31 | Link Women's Group                   |
| 32 | Manor Women's Group                  |
| 33 | Markets Women's Group                |
| 34 | NI Women's Aid Federation            |
| 35 | NI Women's European Platform         |
| 36 | Fermanagh Women's Network            |
| 37 | Newry & Mourne Women                 |
| 38 | Newtownabbey Women's Group           |
| 39 | Older Women's Network NI             |
| 40 | Omagh Women's Aid                    |
| 41 | Rape Crisis Centre                   |
| 42 | Rasharkin Women's Group              |
| 43 | Shankill Women's Centre              |
| 44 | Strabane & Lifford Women's Centre    |
| 45 | Strathfoyle Women's Centre           |
| 46 | The Learning Lodge                   |
| 47 | Voices Women's Group                 |

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| 48  | Waterside Women's Centre                   |
| 49  | Windsor Women's Centre                     |
| 50  | Women Connect Project                      |
| 51  | Women into Politics                        |
| 52  | Women's Information Group                  |
| 53  | Women's News                               |
| 54  | Women's TEC                                |
| 55  | Women 2 Gather                             |
| 56  | Women's Resource & Development Agency      |
| 57  | WISPA (Women in Sport & Physical Activity) |
| 58  | Ardcarn Women's Group                      |
| 59  | OIYIN Women's Group                        |
| 60  | Mossley Women's Institute                  |
| 61  | Mount Vernon Women's Group                 |
| 62  | Coole New Opportunities                    |
| 63  | Foyle Women's Aid                          |
|     | <b><u>Associate Members</u></b>            |
| 1.  | Ballymena Community Forum                  |
| 2.  | CiNI                                       |
| 3.  | Community Relations Forum                  |
| 4.  | East Belfast Community Partnership         |
| 5.  | Employers for Childcare                    |
| 6.  | HIV Centre (Women's Support Group)         |
| 7.  | Mencap                                     |
| 8.  | National Women's Council of Ireland        |
| 9.  | Playboard                                  |
| 10. | RNIB (Women's Group)                       |
| 11. | Good Morning Newtownabbey                  |
| 12. | Monkstown Community Association            |
| 13. | WAVE Trauma Centre                         |
| 14. | WEA  |
| 15. | Parents Advice Centre                      |
| 16. | Templemore Community Action Group          |
| 17. | Gingerbread                                |
| 18. | Larne Community Development Project        |
| 19. | Community First Coaching                   |
| 20. | Changing Faces                             |
| 21. | Sands NI                                   |