

A Response to the consultation document -

Work-Life Balance Policies
Education and Library Boards

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Introduction

The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an umbrella organisation for more than 40 community-based women's centres, women's projects and women's infrastructure groups. The WSN aims to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network also aims to strengthen the collective voice for women's groups, to promote and develop networking to enable collective action and to influence policy and decision making processes. The WSN is an important vehicle for taking forward the common agenda of community-based women's organisations, many of which are based in the most disadvantaged areas of the city and which have experienced the worst effects of the political conflict.

The WSN is aware of the unequal position women occupy within the workforce and we welcome the proposals on work-life balance policies being proposed by the Education and Library Boards for those employed by the Boards. We believe that more widespread use of such policies would have a significant impact on the differential activity rates of male and female workers in Northern Ireland:

The economic activity rate for women of working age with dependent children is 63%

2% of women in employment work at home

39% of female employees work part-time compared to 8% of male employees

84% of part-time employees are women

1 (a) Comments on the approach adopted

We welcome the recognition in (2) that 'enabling staff to better blend work and home life benefits the individual, the Education and Library Service and the community.' While flexible work patterns will be of greatest benefit to women, it is important to stress that all employees with caring responsibilities should consider their work-life balance so that the burden of caring does not continue to fall almost exclusively upon women. We also welcome the recognition that is given to the variety of family situations, including that of same-sex partnerships.

1 (b) The on-going programme of work

We welcome the efforts that are being made to extend the programme across all grades, eliminating inequality of treatment between different groups of employees, and to publicise the existence of these policies so that uptake will be increased. We would urge that the Boards make some effort to publicise the adoption of this good practice. Initiatives such as job sharing are still unpopular with many employers and if the Boards communicated the availability to their workforce of work-life balance policies to the wider community, explaining the positive benefits that had resulted, this would make an important contribution to extending good practice. As recent figures indicate that Northern Ireland is suffering from 'long hours' culture, improvement in the position of women in the workforce will only happen through greater availability of policies that help to harmonise commitments to work and home.

1. © The Proposed policy changes and conclusions reached

We are interested in the initiative to develop teleworking and hope that the pilot schemes currently underway will be appropriately monitored and evaluated and that the result will be widely communicated so that there can be more extensive take-up of this option.

2. Are there any needs or issues in relation to any of the equality groups that have not been identified in the report?

While we welcome the fact that those identified as being in 'civil partnerships' will be entitled to domestic leave, we are concerned that as it stands, the wording in the 'Domestic Leave' section is unclear in terms of those who will be eligible under this provision, as the Civil Partnership Act does not include cohabiting heterosexual couples. Will 'accompanying spouse on special visit', now extended to include 'civil partner', also include co-habitee or de facto partner?

We welcome the fact that policy regarding attendance for 'ordination or profession' is being redefined to ensure a multi-faith approach. We would also like to enquire if policies are being adopted in connection with important religious dates for world religions other than Christianity.

3. Are there any other comments on the proposed policy changes?

The proposed policy changes are well thought out, carefully negotiated and should become a model template, particularly for large employers. The commitment to monitor the use of the policies is important and we would urge that an evaluation be carried out with the intention of publicising this initiative so that the results can be more widely disseminated. In addition, we would call on the Boards and Staff Commission to develop a pro-active strategy so that these policies can be adopted by other organisations, in the public and the private sector.

Appendix 1

WSN Member groups

Al-Nisa Women's Group
Ardoyne Women's Group
Ashton Centre
ATLAS (Lisburn)
Ballybeen Women's Centre
Ballymurphy Women's Centre
Belfast Travellers Education & Development Group
Brook (Belfast)
Citywide Women's Consortium
Derry Women's Centre
East Belfast Community Education Centre & Walkway Women's Group
Falls Women's Centre
Footprints Women's Centre
Greenway Women's Centre
Lenadoon Women's Group
Lesbian Advocacy Service Initiative
Northern Ireland Women's European Platform
Parenting Forum NI
Shankill Women's Centre
South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP)
Strabane & Lifford Women's Group
Windsor Women's Centre
Women's Information Group
Women into Politics
Women's News
Women's Resource Development Agency
Women's Tec