



women's

RESOURCE & DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Supporting Women's Groups & Networks across Northern Ireland

Economic Strategy

Consultation Response

Issued by the Northern Ireland Executive

February 2012

Women's Resource and Development Agency

6 Mount Charles

Belfast

BT7 1NZ

Tel: 028 9023 0212

Email: vilma.bisson@wrda.net

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) is a regional organisation whose mission is to 'to advance women's equality and participation in society by working to transform political, economic, social, and cultural conditions'. The organisation was established in 1983 and works with women's groups from all traditions in the most severely disadvantaged communities, and from urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland. We work from the grass roots to the highest levels of policymaking and politics, providing advocacy and lobbying support. WRDA is a membership organisation with over 400 members comprised of Women's Groups, Organisations, and individual members.

WRDA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the Northern Ireland Economic Strategy. Whilst we agree with the commitment 'to working in partnership to build a safe, peaceful, fair and prosperous society where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life now and in the years to come', we are concerned about the measures that will be used to achieve this.

WRDA are concerned that this strategy is in effect gender blind. Other than a brief section in the Equality Impact Assessment, there is no acknowledgement of the gendered nature of the impact of the measures planned to rebuild and rebalance the economy. Women are in a structurally unequal position to men and because of this, economic decisions can and do impact differently on men and on women.

There has been an abundance of research at a global level carried out evidencing that the role of women is essential to economic growth. Women are a vast untapped resource of economic potential. Women could play a more prominent role in the Northern Ireland economy if everything else was equal. Recognising the different lived experiences of men and women and how societal norms mean women still undertake the vast proportion of (unpaid) caring activity must be factored into any debate on enhancing economic participation and growth. However, the Northern Ireland Economic Strategy does not take this into account. The new WRDA report '*The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge?*' shows that women are an untapped potential force for economic growth and their economic empowerment should be part of Northern Ireland's investment and growth strategy.¹ The Executive needs to explore the role women can play in helping to build the economy whilst ensuring that, through growth, Northern Ireland becomes a fair, inclusive, and equal society for everyone.

¹ Hinds, Bronagh (July 2011) *The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge?* Written on behalf of the Women's Resource and Development Agency)

http://www.wrda.net/wrdanews/data/upimages/The_NI_Economy_-_Women_on_the_Edge_Report.pdf

WRDA are very concerned that there is no mention of childcare in this document. Without affordable, available and accessible childcare, many parents (mainly mothers) will not be able to access the labour market resulting in a high level of economic inactivity. Thirty-two per cent of working age inactive women were unavailable for work due to family/home commitments². Northern Ireland is the only region in the UK that does not have legislation to ensure the availability of childcare. WRDA urges the Executive to prioritise the Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland and to recognise the important role that childcare plays in developing economic growth, enhancing equal opportunity and a better standard of living for all.

WRDA have noted that in the seasonally adjusted claimant count (January 2012) the number of women claimants over the last year has increased by 2600 whereas the number of men has only risen by 100³. In the UK, female unemployment is at a 23 year high at 7.5% mainly due to job losses in the public sector and a shortage of job creation in the private sector. WRDA are worried that as the impact of departmental cutbacks take place in Northern Ireland there will be a larger increase here as 42% of employed women are in public sector jobs compared with 34% in the UK. The report commissioned by WRDA "The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge?" demonstrates how women's access to the labour market leads to economic empowerment and works to combat poverty. We urge the Executive to promote jobs for women including bringing about flexible working, equal pay and better childcare.

WRDA are concerned that, given the emphasis on growing the private sector, women will be disproportionately affected due to private sector reluctance in implementing flexible working arrangements. Women (more than men) often need to fit their working hours around the available childcare. Women due to caring commitments may need to take a career break affecting both their income and their pension prospects. Women working in the private sector in Northern Ireland earn considerably less than those in the public sector. These factors impact on women's income both now and in later life. We would urge the Executive to monitor the level of earnings within the private sector and to promote greater flexibility in workplaces. WRDA are worried that the cuts in public spending will lead to a considerable number of public sector workers becoming unemployed. The public sector workforce consists of almost double the number of women to men. Any reduction in staffing levels is likely to impact harder on women at a time when new jobs are difficult to find.

² Women in Northern Ireland (September 2011) Department of Finance and Personnel

³ Seasonally adjusted claimant count (January 2012) http://www.detini.gov.uk/table_3.1_jan_2012.xls

WRDA are extremely concerned that the devolution of corporation tax will adversely impact upon the population as a whole but more specifically on women. There is little evidence to show that reducing corporation tax will bring an equivalent boost to the Northern Ireland economy, but it is evident that a reduction in the Block Grant of approximately £400 million at a time of austerity will result in the Executive needing to make further spending cuts. Women are already disproportionately affected due to Westminster cuts to Welfare and public spending and any further reductions are likely to increase the pressure on women economically and as many women are the main carers within families, cuts to public services will exacerbate the stress of caring. WRDA calls upon the Executive to consider the implications of a further reduction to the Block Grant and to make sure that any changes to expenditure will not disproportionately impact on women.

WRDA notes that the Executive are planning to upskill the workforce. We are concerned that in doing so the majority of training opportunities will be centred on the male workforce. At a recent workshop held by WRDA and CFNI, concerns were voiced about the number of young women directed into training for hair and beauty as there are only so many hairdressing and beautician jobs available. WRDA would like to see women being encouraged to train in fields where there are job prospects. We urge the Executive to promote training in areas of growth to both men and women equally, and to offer women opportunities to reskill in these areas.

In the EQIA, evidence was used from 'The Impact of the Economic Downturn on Women in NI: Quantitative Analyses Technical Report' prepared for WRDA by Dr. Demi Patsos (2010). The statistics used in this were from 2009 and are now outdated. As the economic downturn has progressed, women are feeling a greater impact due to cuts in public expenditure, rising unemployment, and a private sector that is not expanding as hoped.

WRDA contend that the proposals in terms of rebuilding and rebalancing the Northern Ireland Economy must be gender proofed and a detailed analysis provided on how this will impact on men and on women. Economic decisions are not gender neutral and the Executive must become aware of the gender implications of the proposals and any decisions taken. WRDA want to ensure that women will not be affected adversely.

WRDA support the growth of the private sector and the building of a prosperous and inclusive economy. We want to make sure however that this does not happen at the expense of women in NI. WRDA are happy to discuss this further.