



women's

RESOURCE & DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Supporting Women's Groups & Networks across Northern Ireland

Programme for Government

Consultation Response

Issued by the Northern Ireland Executive

February 2012

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Introduction

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.

General Comments

WRDA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the Programme for Government. WRDA agrees with the guiding principles within the Programme for Government. We are pleased to note that the Programme for Government has recognised the connection between poverty, deprivation and disadvantage to social progress, economic recovery, and having a peaceful, fair and prosperous society. We welcome the idea of greater collaborative working within the Government and between the Government and the voluntary and community sector.

WRDA has some concerns in relation to the Programme for Government. The Programme for Government was issued a considerable amount of time after the budget which makes it difficult to determine the feasibility of this. The draft Programme for Government states 'the EQIA has also been issued for public consultation' but this was not issued until 10th January 2012. This raises concerns that equality impact is not regarded as an important issue. The programme for Government is high level with little detail available to demonstrate how the key commitments will transfer into actions making it difficult to comment on programme delivery. Some of the milestones/outputs are very limited or non-specific making comment difficult. There is a need for action plans and details of programme delivery to ensure that the priorities are fit for purpose and to ensure that outputs are being met. As there is only a lead department mentioned for each commitment, there should be structures in hand to ensure cross-departmental working. Overall, it is a document that offers commitments without giving any detail on how the Executive plans to meet the targets mentioned.

Main Issues within Key Priorities

Growing a Sustainable Economy and Investing in the Future

1. *Pressing for the devolution of corporation tax* – 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.

2. *Support the promotion of over 25,000 new jobs* – 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 100¹. 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 similar or larger increase here. In Northern Ireland 42% of employed women are in public sector jobs. 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.

3. *Childcare Strategy* – WRDA are very concerned that there is no mention of the Childcare Strategy under this priority. It is widely acknowledged that lack of childcare provision is the single most cited barrier to parents seeking employment. Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom that does not have legislation to ensure the availability of childcare. Thirty-two per cent of working age inactive women were unavailable for work due to family/home commitments². WRDA urges the Executive to advance 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. It is vital to provide affordable, available and accessible childcare to increase women’s economic activity.

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

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

4. *Growing the Private Sector/Reducing Public Sector* – 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.
5. *Training and Skills* – 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.

Creating Opportunities, Tackling Disadvantage and Improving Health and Well-Being

1. *Poverty* – WRDA are pleased that the Executive is making a commitment to reducing the level of poverty in Northern Ireland. However, we feel that reducing the level of child poverty should be given priority considering that Northern Ireland has an extremely high level of child poverty. The Households Below Average Income Survey (November 2011) produced by DSD shows that 120,000 (28%) children are living in poverty, an increase of 3% from 2009/10. Northern Ireland is the only area in the UK where this has increased from 2009/10. WRDA ask the Executive to prioritise actions that will alleviate child poverty and to demonstrate progress and outcomes on the Child Poverty Strategy.
2. *Welfare Reform* – WRDA are surprised to see that 'introducing changes to the welfare system' is regarded as a way of tackling disadvantage. Women

comprise 53% of benefit recipients in Northern Ireland and given that many more women work part-time and are on lower wages, they rely more on benefits and tax credits than men do and these make up a larger share of their income³. This means that many of the changes to the welfare system will disproportionately impact upon women. Whilst WRDA acknowledge the need to incentivise work and to simplify an extremely complex benefit system, we are extremely concerned that changes to social protection will in fact unfairly impact upon women and erode women's economic independence and rights. The planned changes to the welfare system such as a monthly payment, all money to be paid to one person in household and the loss of incentives for a second earner will all dramatically impact on women's lives and will result in a loss of economic independence rolling back women's equality. WRDA strongly recommend that Universal Credit is paid to the carer (usually the woman) within the household to increase economic independence and to encourage expenditure on the children. It would alleviate some hardship if Universal Credit was to be paid weekly. We note the commitment to set up an advisory group to assist Ministers in alleviating hardship including any implications of the UK Government's Welfare Reform Programme but we do not feel that this is sufficient to protect people from the worst impacts of the changes ahead. We urge the Executive to look at ways in which the impacts of welfare changes on women can be alleviated such as weekly payments and to put these into practice.

Building a Strong and Shared Community

1. *Women's sector* - WRDA is disappointed that no reference has been made of the role women and women's community based organisations in promoting good relations particularly those organisations situated in areas of high levels of socio-economic disadvantage or situated within interface areas and areas experiencing the most demographic change due to inward migration in recent years, and these are the areas which have been most affected by the conflict. For example, women's community based organisations and women's centres offer childcare, education and training classes which have been accessed by women from different religious backgrounds, race and sexual orientation.⁴ WRDA urges the Executive to ensure women are fully recognised in this priority and to recognise the role of women's community based organisations in promoting good relations through their services provided to women with multiple identities such as race, political opinion, religion and sexual orientation.

³ WRDA Report (2011) *The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge?*, Bronagh Hinds (p117)

⁴ WRDA (2007) *Is Gender Part of Good Relations?: Report of a Conference on a Shared Future*, pgs 24-26

Equality Impact Assessment

Whilst the EQIA recognises the socio-economic inequalities between men and women and the lack of female representation in public life, there appears to be no serious actions to mitigate these within the document. We would like to see greater integration between the Programme for Government and the EQIA. WRDA urge the Executive to take actions to minimise inequalities and to prevent the current economic situation from worsening already existing inequalities.

Conclusion

WRDA recognise that the Programme for Government is written as a dynamic document in order to respond to change, however this makes it very difficult to respond to as it is hard to foresee possible impacts of actions without some idea of delivery plans. WRDA feel that much of this Programme for Government has ignored the principles of gender analysis by failing to recognise the differential impact of its actions upon women and upon men.

WRDA ask that the Executive recognise that women are in a structurally unequal position in society and that due to this existing inequality further changes will impact disproportionately upon women. We urge the Northern Ireland Government to take this into account when deciding on the Programme for Government. WRDA are happy to discuss this further