



# **Response to Consultation**

## **'Strengthening Women's Voices in Government'**

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## **Introduction**

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) is a regional organization operating throughout Northern Ireland, with a mission to 'advance women's equality and participation in society by working to bring about social, political and economic change'. The organisation was established in 1983 and continues to focus its efforts on working with women and community organisations located within disadvantaged communities. 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 Strengthening Women's Voices in Government. We are acutely conscious of our position as women in a devolved region of the UK. We are directly affected by policy decisions taken in the UK while having little opportunity to influence those decisions. The lack of adequate political representation of Northern Irish women in the UK parliament and in our devolved Assembly means that it is very important that we have a voice in structures that have a direct link to government.

While not a perfect body, the Women's National Commission did provide a '4 Nations' opportunity for women within the UK to come together, to share experiences, and to communicate the views of their member organisations to government. In addition, WNC partner meetings enabled women in the devolved regions to communicate directly to WNC officials on a regular basis. It was, in other words, a two way process of communication.

## **Priorities for women in Northern Ireland**

For there to be a new gender architecture that is meaningful for women in Northern Ireland, it must acknowledge that there are key issues for women here that have to be addressed.

- The unequal treatment of women in Northern Ireland with regards to accessing abortion facilities, given the lack of the provisions of the 1967 Abortion Act.
- Northern Ireland lags behind equality legislation in the UK as the Equality Act 2010 does not apply here and we have had no similar initiative to harmonise and improve our equality legislation.
- Northern Ireland differs uniquely from the rest of the UK in that it is a country still emerging from a protracted conflict. UNSCR 1325 should apply to Northern Ireland and it is the responsibility of the UK government to include Northern Ireland within its National Action Plan.
- The economic situation, the continuing economic downturn, welfare reform and cuts to the public sector are also matters of acute concern, as all the evidence shows women are facing the most severe impact of all of this.
- The need for an effective strategy to deal with all forms of gender-based violence.
- The continuing under-representation of women in public and political life.

### **A National Machinery for Women**

We continue to believe that a structure similar to that of the WNC - one that provided for direct contact between women on a 4 nation basis, and one that enabled women to be represented at an international level with independence from government – should be the basis for any new proposal. Our concern is that there is no serious attempt to develop a structure that could be regarded as providing an informed and independent voice.

It is essential that the expertise of the sector is utilized effectively. We are unsure of the intention behind 'bringing in expertise from the women's sector and beyond'. What does this mean? Why is there any need to bring in resources from 'beyond' the sector? Will the expertise be resourced so that women's groups can play an effective role, and will

that expertise be called upon on a 4 nation basis, recognizing that all expertise does not reside in the south-east of England?

On an international level, there are groups holding consultative status to UN bodies. These groups have the confidence of the sector and the capacity for effective representation. However, resourcing is often a difficulty. Any new system needs to recognize these groups and incorporate their expertise. This will include providing resources to enable continued representation. We cannot see how independent representation will be continued if government focuses only on 'direct engagement' between government and organisations that represent women. The ability to control issues resides with government, and goes against the ethos of the CEDAW reporting process in particular.

### **An engagement strategy**

We hope that there will not be undue reliance on IT as a method of communication. There are a number of objections to giving primacy to technology: it is a one-way method of communication as there are decided limits to any two-way communication; it will mean that smaller and less well resourced groups will not be reached; those who do not have English as their first language will not be engaged by this process; it does not take into account the fact that not all parts of the country have good internet access, so rural women in particular will be disadvantaged. Most importantly, we do not believe that policy decisions can be made simply by collecting the opinions of individual women. Women's organisations have built up considerable policy expertise, including evidence-based policy based on their direct involvement with women at the grass roots, and that should be recognized and resourced.

Networking events and conferences will continue to be important. We advocate continued regular meetings in the devolved regions that will enable women to consider policy issues and provide opportunities for women's groups to feed issues into a UK

structure. For this to be effective, there will need to be resources, both for the sector to come together and for each devolved region to be able to transmit their concerns. We would urge GEO to engage with the groups that currently exist, and to agree a mechanism that would allow for representation, both at a UK and an international level.

## **Conclusions**

WRDA recommends that the GEO considers the strengths that the WNC possessed in terms of its 4 nations model and ensures that whatever national machinery for gender equality is developed will incorporate a 4 nation structure that will provide equal access to participation and will support stakeholder groups to critically engage with and monitor the policy process.

In addition, the new initiative must include a means of enabling the women's sector to engage in international policy decision making.

Above all, there needs to be a commitment to resource the women's sector in order to ensure maximum and effective participation from across the UK.