



Women's

RESOURCE & DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Supporting Women's Groups and Networks across Northern Ireland

"Gender Matters": Towards a Cross-Departmental Strategic Framework to Promote Gender Equality for Women and Men 2005-2015.

WRDA and the Rural Women's Networks welcome this opportunity to comment upon the draft "Gender Matters": Towards a Cross-Departmental Strategic Framework to Promote Gender Equality for Women and Men 2005-2015.

The WRDA's mission is to ensure that the diverse needs of women throughout Northern Ireland are recognised and addressed.

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The Rural Women's Networks

1. INTRODUCTION:

While there is an increasingly sophisticated framework in place in Northern Ireland that is meant to prohibit discrimination against women, backed up with International obligations this does not appear to have manifested as it should to reflect a measurable improvement in the diverse lives of women across Northern Ireland.

A profound shift has taken place at international level over the last two decades in relation to the advancement of women's equality and within that environment the most important tool for challenging women's inequality is CEDAW.

Within Northern Ireland our expectation of Section 75 was set to herald an equally profound shift alongside continued work on other areas of legislation, not losing sight of the International commitments of CEDAW etc

According to the UN Women's Committee "Equality of results is the logical corollary of de facto or substantive equality".

In a society where there is gender equality these results may be quantitative and/or qualitative in nature—that is

“ Women enjoying their rights in various fields in fairly equal numbers with men, enjoying the same income levels, equality in decision-making and political influence and enjoying freedom from violence.”

While we welcome the governments attention to gender equality through the GES consultation process, we do not believe that if you had to benchmark this strategy to the above, as it currently stands, it would deliver on women's equality.

- **We contend therefore that a separate Strategy for women should replace the proposed Gender Equality Strategy.**

2. STRUCTURAL & EXISTING INEQUALITIES.

WRDA feel that a meaningful strategy must start with a clear understanding of the structural reasons for women's inequality and include the multiple discrimination experienced by women. The list of gender

indicators given lacks this focus because it ignores any indicator which cannot be directly related to the experience of men and women.

By failing to acknowledge that unequal relationships already exist between women and men, Gender Matters offers no analysis or provision for redressing the imbalance. Further, there is a failure to recognise that equality cannot be achieved and/or maintained by treating women and men the same due to the nature of their current unequal living situations. Re-defining the relationships which currently exist between women and men must be placed at the centre of this new Strategy.

WRDA believe that education is a key factor in addressing inequality, not only of women but also of the wider community. The significant role our Education System has to play in promoting gender equality needs to be recognised, and the appropriate structures put in place to challenge and break down traditional stereotypes (e.g. what are typically considered female-v-male roles and occupations). Gender neutral courses and the promotion of gender neutral career choices have a huge part to play in realising equality of opportunity.

- **Structures need to be put in place to ensure that our Education System has an active role to play in promoting gender equality.**

3. MULTIPLE IDENTITIES.

Choosing to cut and paste some but not all of the categories set out in Section 75, namely inequalities relating to gender, marital/relationship status, whether we have dependants or are carers, and whether we are transgendered, seriously limits the scope of Gender Matters, and fails to recognise that gender when combined with issues such as ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, political and/or religious beliefs, can lead to further inequality for women, and therefore cannot be examined in isolation. In order to legitimately advance gender equality and equality of opportunity all categories of discrimination capable of adversely affecting women must be identified and genuine efforts made to resolve these inequalities.

- **We propose a fully integrated approach which reflects the multiple identities of women which we believe can only be addressed through a separate women's strategy.**

4. THE BURDEN OF CARING, CHOICE & POVERTY.

“Women are more likely than men to provide the main care for children [and the elderly] within their household”. Although this statement undoubtedly reflects the reality of the situation Gender Matters does not, as would be expected of a Gender Equality Strategy, query or examine the structures in place which sustain this imbalance. Rather than highlight the responsibility that men have in sharing the burden of caring, the Strategy sidesteps the subject by raising the issue of women’s choice.

The suggestion that women who engage in unpaid caring roles within the home or family, or who work in low paid part-time jobs have a ‘choice’ is absurd and ignores the reality of their financial and individual living situations. Frequently women are forced to take on these roles due to the lack of affordable and accessible childcare, the lack of family-friendly/flexible working arrangements, the lack of educational and/or employment options and the conflicting demands on their time. These issues are real and insurmountable barriers to women’s participation in paid employment and therefore need to be addressed as a matter of urgency if equality of opportunity is to be achieved.

Women who ‘choose’ to engage in the type of work described in the preceding paragraph, or who are forced to take breaks in employment due to family commitments are being unfairly penalised under the current tax and benefit systems. Policy changes must be implemented in order to sort out women’s benefits and entitlements so that inequalities which dramatically increase the likelihood of these women living in poverty can be eliminated.

Another policy area which has the potential to eliminate existing and future inequalities is the area of Pensions. Although identified as a key issue in the Strategy, it is disconcerting to note their absence in the strategic objectives. By failing to tackle the current system which adversely affects women the Strategy is perpetuating existing inequalities which ultimately lead to women living in poverty in later life.

Labelling women who ‘choose’ to work within the home as ‘economically inactive’ is offensive and undermines the contribution which they make both in and out of the home (e.g. voluntary work). The value of this type of work needs to be recognised by government and appropriate income and support structures need to be put in place for carers.

- **Measures to combat the poverty faced by women, particularly single parents and older women, must be implemented as a matter of urgency.**
- **Measures aimed at positively addressing the unequal burden of caring placed on women needs to be implemented.**

5. **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:**

A Strategy which aims to promote gender equality and equal opportunity can not do so at the expense of women, key issues such as domestic violence which sustain women's inequality are not being openly addressed in this Strategy. The impact of domestic violence on women's physical and mental health needs to be addressed.

According to Briega Coyle¹,: "The domestic violence record in Northern Ireland is appalling...Domestic violence accounts for one third of all recorded crime in Northern Ireland and a third of all domestic abuse occurs when a woman is pregnant. There needs to be greater public awareness of this issue, and...a strong lead [needs to be taken] on this.'

Introducing "measures to tackle gender-related violence and abuse" and supporting "systems for female and male victims of such violence" neutralises the gender aspect of domestic violence and does not reflect the reality of the situation. Women are predominantly the victims of Domestic Violence and this fact needs to be documented. The gender-neutral approach taken by this Strategy has the potential to damage work being carried out by organisations such as Women's Aid in relation to violence against women.

It is crucial that the implementation of gender neutral policies does not have an adverse affect, or lead to a reduction or diversion in the resources needed to address areas of concern to girls/women.

- **Strategies linked to domestic violence must acknowledge the fact that women are predominantly the victims of such violence. A gender neutral approach is inadequate and for that reason a separate women's Strategy is needed to deal effectively with this issue.**

6. **WOMEN, THE CONFLICT & RESOLUTION 1325.**

Disappointingly Gender Matters fails to recognise the particular impact of the Conflict on women in Northern Ireland, and the overwhelming contribution they have made in maintaining and sustaining the peace process, despite UN Resolution 1325 recognising that "effective institutional arrangements to guarantee [women and girls] protection and

¹ The Professional Officer for the Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association's for Northern Ireland.

full participation in the peace process can significantly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of ...peace and security.”² Resolution 1325

also “urges Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict”. Gender Matters has not put any measures in place to ensure women’s increased representation at all the decision making levels in Northern Ireland.

- **The impact the conflict has had on women needs to be properly addressed.**
- **The work carried out by the women’s community and voluntary sector during, and post conflict needs to be recognised and a commitment given to provide core funding for this sector.**
- **Measures which will ensure women’s increased participation in conflict resolution, and in all decision making levels in Northern Ireland need to be implemented in line with UN Resolution 1325 and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for action.**

7. REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS & SEXUAL HEALTH ISSUES.

Serious concerns must be raised when areas such as Sexual Health and Reproductive rights which disproportionately affect girls/women, are not referred to in the Strategy. The need for comprehensive sex education courses in schools together with the provision of accessible information and sexual health services is being overlooked as a long term method of raising awareness and preventing teenage/unplanned pregnancies. The Strategy’s failure to address these issues has an unduly detrimental effect on girls/women by prolonging their continued lack of knowledge regarding their individual reproductive capacity. Enforced motherhood quite often leads to poverty, lack of support and the failure of government to meet the subsequent needs of these women and the needs of their children.

Advancing and empowering girls/women through education must be a key issue in any Strategy which aims to deal effectively with women’s equality. Educating girls/women on their sexual and reproductive rights empowers them to make choices which will ultimately improve both their health and their future.

- **Areas such as Reproductive rights and sexual health, which disproportionately affect women, must be dealt with as a priority and**

² UN S/Res/1325 (2000)

we believe this can only be done through a separate women's Strategy.

8. GENDER BUDGETING.

The Government needs to commit to the introduction of Gender Budgeting and set out precisely how it intends to ensure that resources are distributed equally in the future. Gender Matters does not contain such a commitment.

- **There must be sustained and committed funding to the area of Gender Equality in order for all Departments to make real their national and international commitments and obligations.**

9. DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS.

Gender Matters is a half-hearted attempt to fulfil our domestic and international commitments and obligations under the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). As part of each Government's undertaking strategies were to be developed 'in consultation with relevant institutions and non governmental organisations'³ to remove ALL obstacles to equality for women and ensure a gender perspective in all government policies and programmes. These strategies were to 'be comprehensive, have time bound targets and benchmarks for monitoring, and include proposals for allocating resources for implementation'. Gender Matters falls far short of meeting these commitments.

- **A Strategy for women must be developed following International principles and guidelines, such as Beijing+ 10, CEDAW and UN Resolution 1325, to ensure the increased participation of women in public and political life, and at all levels in decision-making and conflict resolution within Northern Ireland.**

10. GENDER MAINSTREAMING & POSITIVE ACTION MEASURES.

Gender Mainstreaming is by definition "*the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and*

³ Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Para 297, UN, DAW, Sept 1995, New York

*evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic, and social spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.*⁴

Despite placing importance on the process of mainstreaming as a means of achieving equality of opportunity the Strategy ignores the use of positive action measures such as those envisaged by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and used by the Scottish Assembly to promote the ‘full and equal political participation’ of women. In order to open up areas which have traditionally been inaccessible to the most disadvantaged, government needs to explore all the legislative options available to it, both national and international. Failing to put positive/affirmative action measures in place to support gender mainstreaming diminishes the prospect of achieving equality of opportunity for women in public and political life.

The recent review of the operation of Section 75 by Faris and Mc Laughlin raises concerns of the dangers of a **gender neutral** approach. Section 75 requires promoting equality of opportunity between men and women generally. This requires looking at the position of women and men **in reality**, highlighting the differentials and then targeting resources to ensure the differentials are addressed. Section 75 therefore should be seen as an attempt to give greater focus to the disadvantaged position of women than had hitherto been the case under traditional anti-discrimination legislation. Section 75 requires the consideration of how each policy can be redesigned to promote gender equality. Where necessary positive action measures will need to be adopted.

- **WRDA propose the introduction of a dual approach whereby Gender Mainstreaming is complemented by positive action measures designed to redress the historic disadvantages experienced by women, and improve the under-representation of women in all areas of public and political life.**

11. SHORTFALLS.

- The indicators set out in Annex 8 don't appear to be linked into the Strategy in any meaningful way. This is a clear omission on the part of the OFMDFM and needs to be rectified.
- Gender disaggregated data has not been collected or provided in relation to the impact of age, race, sexual orientation, disability, religious, economic and social status on gender. Gender disaggregated data must be collected in these areas in order to provide us with a complete picture

⁴ General Assembly, UN ECOSOC (A/RES/52/100) Dec 1997

of the range of inequalities suffered by women today, and to ensure that unambiguous monitoring takes place.

- The Strategy refers to 'measurable improvements' yet does not provide any specific targets or actions. Targets and actions need to be specifically set out in order for subsequent monitoring and evaluation to be carried out effectively.
- Despite the pivotal role which the women's community and voluntary sector has played in pushing issues such as women's equality to the forefront, Gender Matters has ignored the fact that the women's sector is currently in crisis due to funding uncertainty. A commitment to provide core funding for this sector is vital to ensure that issues such as women's equality etc are not rolled back in the midst of differing political climates.

CONCLUSION:

In its current format Gender Matters lacks the long term vision and commitment needed to bring about real change for women, and is at best purely aspirational. By failing to address the existing social, cultural and economic inequalities faced by women any realistic prospect of achieving gender equality and/or equality of opportunity is lost. As a result a separate women's Strategy which deals comprehensively with the inequalities suffered by women, as opposed to the broader category of gender inequalities must to be implemented.

In order to effectively replace Gender Matters this new Strategy needs to be clear and coherent, and deal comprehensive with the current barriers to women's inequality. Precise aims and objectives need to be formulated, and definite timeframes put in place so that proper evaluation and monitoring can take place.