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## **Northern Ireland Draft Priorities and Budget 2006-2008**

### **Introduction**

The Women's Resource and Development Agency is a regional organization whose mission is to 'advance women's equality and participation in society by working to bring about social, political and economic change'. Our perspective in commenting on the Draft Priorities and Budgets is informed by our experience as a women's organization and also by our involvement in the voluntary and community sector.

### **The economy**

We are concerned that the omission of any acknowledgment of gender or women's issues will have adverse repercussions for the women's sector. This is evident in 2.16, 'The Economy', where women are not mentioned. The Lisbon Strategy aims at promoting a knowledge-based economy, there is growing national and international obligations in relation to the inclusion of women and recognition of the benefits that such inclusive working can produce, yet the Draft Priorities and Budgets ignores the potential contribution of women to the development of the economy. In 2.21 there is no recognition of the gendered nature of economic inactivity. If there was, then a strategy to ensure women received appropriate education and training and that barriers to women's participation were removed would have to follow. A gender-blind approach ensures that the specificity of women's issues are not addressed in any of the measures contained within the Draft Priorities and Budget.

In the cross-cutting funding package Skills and Science we are pleased to note that labour market opportunities of lone parents are to be extended. We ask that this strategy be implemented in conjunction with representatives of the women's sector, particularly with women's training organisations, so that the strategy has the support of lone parents and addresses their needs and is not seen as a coercive means of reducing dependency on benefits.

### **Childcare**

We welcome the recognition of lone parents in 2.29 and a commitment to 'removing barriers they face to fully participating in the social and economic life of the community'. There is however a serious omission, in the lack of any

acknowledgment that the overwhelming majority of lone parent families are headed by women. Their greatest barrier to participation - childcare – is not mentioned in the list of areas needing coordinated action.

While we welcome the commitment to children and young people and a commitment to ring-fence funding for pre-school and after-school activities, we would also have liked some acknowledgment of the important role played by women's centres in providing high quality care for children. 2.46 promises a 'strong and appropriate role for the Voluntary and Community Sector'. We would like an assurance that there will be a joined-up approach to childcare and the women's sector provision of childcare so that the sector will be funded to play a 'strong and appropriate role' commensurate with its expertise and investment in infrastructure. 3.72 (a) does not specify women's centres in the list of settings offering child care and we urge that this be done. Government needs to draw on the experience of the women's sector in relation to the provision of services in disadvantaged communities.

Recognition of the voluntary sector's role in public services is important, but we must add that this is not the only role performed. As the Taskforce on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector made clear, it also has a wider and more strategic role in advocacy and active citizenship. Funding for this is difficult to access and will be more difficult when it is not recognized by government in setting out its priorities for public expenditure.

### **Water charging**

The WRDA is opposed to the formation of GOCO as we believe that this could result in the eventual privatisation of the service. In the light of recent revelations regarding civil servant misinformation on water charging, we urge that more time is given to ensure that a future policy on water charges will be based on the need for social equity and environmental sustainability. The proposed 25% discount will not alleviate hardship for low-income families.

### **Building Equality and Community Cohesion**

We are concerned with the vagueness of the targets on this priority outcome (and indeed, the targets under the other priority outcomes). What legislation is to be improved; how is the Equality Commission to be supported and what strategic actions will 'promote equality and social inclusion of people with disabilities, of different ethnic backgrounds, gender, sexual orientation and older people'?

### **Department of Agriculture and Rural Development**

The WRDA works closely with the rural women's sector and we are aware of the difficulties facing women in rural areas and in rural development. While DARD states its commitment to 'the economic and social revitalisation of disadvantages

rural areas' the PSA targets do not relate to this objective. Spending on rural development in 2005-6 is projected at half that of 2004-5. We are concerned that this will be to the detriment of the rural community infrastructure and we urge DARD to consider the possible impact on rural communities.

### **Department of Education**

The WRDA repeats its call for women's centres to be included in the list of venues providing early years education and after-school activities. Without that specific recognition, it is more than likely that the women's sector will not be recognized as providers, with consequences for future funding. We would draw attention to the fact that the strategy of the UK government is to build on existing projects that can demonstrate their effectiveness in engaging marginalised families and communities (such as Women's Centres) in order to develop the menu of services needed.

Additional spending for children with special educational needs is promised. The WRDA supports the Dyslexia Awareness Raising Together Group (DART), which has called for teacher training colleges to introduce a compulsory module in dyslexia. As at least 10% of the population is dyslexic, this measure would help in early diagnosis so that all individuals have access to education that provides for their needs.

### **Department for Employment and Learning**

We are disappointed to see that DEL does not include the voluntary and community sector and more specifically, the women's community-based education sector as 'key service channels' in its objective 'to promote economic, social and personal development'. Community and voluntary organizations are considered to be acceptable service channels 'to help people into employment and promote good working practices'. The lack of a gendered understanding of how people access education and training means that the vital work of enabling those who have been failed by the education system to want to engage in learning is discounted. This is a crucial area of work for the women's community-based education sector, where the environment is informal, the reality of women's lives is accepted and where centres often provide services such as health support and counselling for those struggling with multiple inequalities. Achieving a basic level of well-being is acknowledged as the first step in returning to learn and the women's sector contribution to social and personal development should be funded by DEL. The emphasis on FE as the 'primary agent' for lifelong learning should not mean that other learning providers are not supported. Transport, childcare and course costs are recognized barriers to women's inclusion in learning. FE does not fund these costs to women's centres, with the consequence that centres often provide classes without full cost recovery.

The community-based women's education sector provides women with opportunities for personal development as well as providing a wide range of fully accredited courses. It makes a valuable contribution to achieving adult learning and employment targets and to ensuring the inclusion of disadvantaged women and communities. We would urge DEL to include the sector in its funding strategy.

### **Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment**

The WRDA notes that DETI will seek to encourage more business starts and to maximize the contribution of the social economy. We hope that the issue of the under representation of women will be addressed within the overall strategy. We would draw attention to the Global Entrepreneurship Report commissioned by Invest NI, which found that women in NI have more negative attitudes towards entrepreneurship. Only 28% believed they had the skills to start-up a business and 43% stated that fear of failure would prevent them from starting a business. Given the specific barriers faced by women that prevent access to the employment market, self-employment provides a means to a degree of economic security, if the appropriate support is in place. The women's sector recognises the benefits of the social economy, both to the individual participants and to society more generally and would hope that DETI will have a target that seeks to promote female entrepreneurship.

### **Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety**

One of the strategic aims of the WRDA is 'To tackle health inequalities affecting women'. This is achieved by developing and delivering health programmes based on social models of health and well being which focus on the role of socio-economic factors affecting all aspects of health, poverty, educational disadvantage and social exclusion. We welcome the approach taken by DHSSPS with regards to individual agency, through encouraging people to take preventative measures and promoting access to health and social services. We hope that this strategy will ensure a close working relationship between the voluntary and community sector and the statutory sector, both in service delivery and in the promotion of health education.

### **Department for Social Development**

The WRDA welcomes the commitment to urban and community renewal, with its focus on regenerated urban areas and strong communities. The Neighbourhood Renewal programme has yet to work effectively in all areas and we would hope that one priority will be to ensure that all areas have a programme responsive to local needs that is able to disburse funding in an effective manner. We also urge a gender audit of the Neighbourhood Partnerships to ensure that women are fully represented. If Partnerships are still to be set up then we would advise that attention be given to the question of their gender balance.

## **Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister**

As a women's organization that has been involved in facilitating consultation around the Gender Equality Strategy we are concerned to note that a gender strategy receives no specific mention as an objective within OFMDFM. Instead, we are given a PSA target to 'put in place co-ordinated strategic action to achieve measurable improvements across a range of indicators in gender equality'. As the Gender Strategy should inform action, we voice our concern that OFMDFM have let slip its commitment to the development of a Gender Equality Strategy. OFMDFM has a statutory duty to respond to the issues raised in the consultation process and we believe that this should be listed as an objective. Having said that, we also call for greater clarity around the action. When will it be put in place and what specific outcomes are intended?

### **Conclusion**

We concur with the unease expressed by NICVA regarding the short timetable that exists between the end of the consultation period on 5 December and the redrafting of the Priorities one week later. This does not inspire us with confidence that our views are being listened to. We hope that the consultation process is not a paper exercise and that consultation issues will be made public and responses given.