

**Women's Resource and Development Agency/Rural Women's Networks**

**RESPONSE TO PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT  
December 2004**

Women's Resource and Development Agency  
Roe Valley Women's Network  
Newry and Mourne Women  
Fermanagh Women's Network  
Mid Ulster Women's Network  
South Armagh Rural Women's Network  
Omagh Area Women's Network

Contact:

Anne O'Reilly  
WRDA  
6 Mount Charles  
Belfast  
Tel: 028 9023 0212  
Email: [anne.oreilly@wrda.net](mailto:anne.oreilly@wrda.net)

## **1 Introduction**

1.1 The Women's Resource and Development Agency ("WRDA") was established in 1983 with the objective of advancing the participation, inclusion and equality of women, working for the benefit of their own communities and society in general. The organisation continues to focus its efforts on working with and through women and community organisations located within disadvantaged and/or divided communities.

1.2 By strengthening the role and position of women in their own communities, it is anticipated that wider community change will be brought about, leading to the advancement of the broader vision for peace, reconciliation and social inclusion. The WRDA recognise the importance of the following key areas in ensuring continuous progress: training, development, education, building community capacity and working towards social and policy change. WRDA welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Programme for Government.

1.3 WRDA is one of a number of organisations responding to the needs of women within Northern Ireland society. Our policy remit and practical experience of dealing directly with women provides us with a unique insight into the problems affecting women and the issues most pertinent to them. This experience will direct and inform our response to the latest consultation.

## **2 Rural Women's Networks**

2.1 The membership of the Rural Women's Networks shows that they are representative of upwards of 1,500 women who are directly involved in women's groups, with an average of 16 member groups per network. Data collected to quantify the participation of women in education and training programmes shows that approximately 10,700 women a year are accessed by the women's networks to local learning opportunities. An additional estimated 200 volunteer hours a week are generated through the activities of network members.

2.2 The Rural Women's Networks work with women in areas of greatest social need and the work which they represent contributes to the delivery of government policy objectives as described in the proposed Rural Development Programme, Investing for Health, Lifelong Learning, Promoting Social Inclusion, New Targeting Social Need and the Active Communities Initiative.

2.3 The Rural Women's Networks provide a mechanism for work on health promotion and preventative healthcare, for second chance education, and for the inclusion of women in local rural development work, through participation in area planning, partnership boards, enterprise development and the formation of local groups to provide local services. The capacity of the women's networks to form a link to rural women is valued by Health Trusts, education providers and the Rural Support Networks whilst individual women see the networks as a vital support mechanism sensitive to their needs.

### **3 Overall Comments**

3.1 WRDA and the Rural Women's Networks welcome the opportunity to respond to the Programme for Government. We consider the consultation to be one of the most fundamental consultation documents produced by government and as such we have high expectations of its Vision for Northern Ireland; evidence of good practice in terms of an integrated approach to government policy and practice, an absolute and stated commitment to equality and human rights at its heart and finally evidence a robust and measurable approach by **all** departments in the delivery of their respective social and economic objectives.

3.2 We are of the view the document fails to deliver in this regard and is disappointing in respect of social objectives in particular. This represents a retrograde step based on recent years whereby there was a focus on both social and economic priorities.

3.3 Furthermore not to undertake a full Equality Impact Assessment means that the equality impact of the programme is not fully considered. This is totally unacceptable, and sends out a disturbing message to other government departments charged with duties under Section 75.

### **4 Specific Points to Note**

4.1 The document is strong in its economic vision which is to be welcomed but for those not in the labour market this year's vision does not inspire hope or confidence.

4.2 The draft budget appears to spell very bad news for the Voluntary Community Sector. The paradox is frontline services by the Sector are being cut in the key areas of health and education which works directly against the stated intention to increase services to the frontline.

4.3 How services are currently being delivered is not meeting government's own stated objectives yet the Voluntary and Community Sector with its reach and depth and ability to engage people directly in their own health or in increasing access to education is being seriously eroded by this document.

4.4 Why is it that it is the Voluntary and Community Sector's 'frontline' services and activities are bearing the brunt of change despite the Compact, Taskforce Report and the UK Treasury Review all of which clearly outlines the policy direction of engaging the Sector in direct service delivery?

4.5 'Strategy without action is a day dream.' There are numerous policy initiatives and strategies named in the document but it is virtually impossible to get an overall picture of what is being delivered as to its impact on people in Northern Ireland. The budget seems to be working against itself with a vision for 'Anti Poverty Strategy' yet in terms of education if it is viewed by one of the key ways to moderate the effects of poverty and disadvantage is purely directed on 'training for jobs'. This situation will seriously erode the established track record of the Women's Sector in terms of its training and development role. That there is no mention of education or health (insofar as it relates to anything outside of the economy) is a serious shortfall.

Where is the attention to the research and evidence on the importance of a 'pathway' to education and health?

4.6 Human rights seems to have disappeared entirely from the document, replacing this with 'building equality and community cohesion' which diminishes the impact needed in respect of broader equality and human rights and omits attention to other critical policy directions in respect of Gender equality and gender mainstreaming and in particular the obligations of CEDAW and 1325.

4.7 We are extremely disappointed that the Executive Programme Funds have been stopped. The scrapping of the Children's Fund which supports women as parents at community level is incomprehensible when we are waiting on a strategy for children and young people and aiming to meet UK targets on the eradication of child poverty. There is no reference to the timing or resourcing of a proposed childcare strategy a major flaw when you consider the decision from the Peace II extension programme to withdraw childcare.

4.8 Overall the whole dimension of poverty and social inclusion as it impacts on women and other groups is not reflected in any of the key priorities.

## 5 **Summary**

5.1 As stated we have major concerns with this document particularly in the areas of health and education, the approach to tackling poverty and social exclusion, and the erosion of equality and human rights, which particularly impacts on the work of the sector.

5.2 We are concerned that health is no longer reflected in the key priorities. The loss of focus on 'working for a healthier people' means the loss of emphasis on health outcomes at the highest levels of stated intention. We believe working through the sector in health promotion and engaging people in their own health must continue to be a policy imperative and stands a better chance of success if government wishes to increase health and well being levels. The Women's Sector plays a major part in improving the health of women and their families.

5.3 We know that acute services will always consume all the resources allocated to them but encouraging and enabling people to make the switch to healthier lifestyles is the only sustainable approach. It is also an approach that will address the major health inequalities in Northern Ireland. Resources must therefore be attached to health awareness and health promotion.

5.4 Education is also a key concern, we have lost 'investing in education and skills'. We consider this to be a backward step that disregards the evidence and research that shows that community education in particular is an effective and efficient intervention to increase skills. We consider that investment in community education is a critical first step to increase access for women and disadvantaged groups and is a major social inclusion issue.

5.5 We would urge that all education is not now seen as an adjunct to the economy. We seem to have forgotten the shockingly high rates of adult literacy (25% of adults).

5.6 While we welcome the attempt to set out a vision for the NI economy it must speak to everyone in that we can all have a part to play as equal, and included citizens. Any vision that puts the economy at its centre is highly unlikely to help the people most excluded and indeed puts people at further risk.

5.7 Finally, without the Equality Impact Assessment on this document it is practically impossible to judge the impact in respect of women bearing in mind the current Gender Equality Strategy and government's obligations in respect of CEDAW and 1325 which commits Government to full and equal participation of women proportionate to their numbers across all levels of Northern Ireland society particularly in respect of 1325 in the context of creating our vision of a post-conflict society.