

Response to the Consultation on the Bill of Rights Forum

6 December 2006

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) is a regional organisation whose mission is 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 and through women and community organisations located within disadvantaged and/or divided communities.

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.

WRDA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation document outlining the draft proposals for a Bill of Rights Forum. Structures and practices within public life in Northern Ireland make it impossible for women to participate equally with men, with adverse consequences for the representation of issues of interest to women. Many women responded to the consultations concerning progressing the Bill of Rights, testimony to our hope that a Bill of Rights could be an effective vehicle for addressing the serious disadvantages women face in their economic, social and personal lives.

Time-frame and remit

While the time frame for recommendations by the Forum is extremely narrow, we believe it could be possible if the Forum is inclusive of those organisations whose remit is reflected in a wide interpretation of the 'particular circumstances' of Northern Ireland and if there is full consultation.

We would welcome the involvement of the NIHRIC in assisting the work of the Forum and would urge that the role of the Commission is clearly defined from the outset.

Chair

The independence of the Chair of the Forum is essential and to be welcomed. It will be important to ensure that a candidate of international reputation and expertise in human rights be appointed. We hope that the search for such a candidate will consider male and female candidates equally.

Membership

The composition of the Forum is to be a maximum of 28, including the Chair. While we accept the importance of political party involvement, we also believe that the wider civil society has an important role to play and, indeed, has been playing such a constructive role over the past years in mobilising wider support

for a Bill of Rights. This role should therefore be reflected in nominations of equal numbers of representatives from civil society organisations.

Women's Voices

It is vital that the views of women in Northern Ireland are directly represented on the Forum. We have not had the time to consult our members on this issue, given the short time-scale of the consultation, but the women's sector has a long history of working together on major policy issues and would be happy to nominate representatives to participate on the Forum. In addition, it will be important to ensure a gender balance on the Forum and we would suggest that political parties are asked to consider this matter when nominating their representatives.

Yours sincerely

Dr Margaret Ward
Director