



## **SUBMISSION TO THE REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

### **Introduction**

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) is a regional organisation with a mission to 'advance women's equality and participation in society by working to bring about social, political and economic change'. The WRDA works closely with women in rural areas of Northern Ireland and this response will in part reflect the specific and often ignored needs of rural women.

The WRDA welcomes the opportunity to submit a contribution to the Review of Public Administration. We believe that the impact of the RPA will have seriously detrimental consequences for the representation of women and of women's interests unless there is an understanding of the unequal gender divide that currently exists, together with strong commitments to introduce mechanisms to advance women's equality within all sections of society. For that reason our submission will largely concentrate upon the implications of the review for women in general and for rural women in particular.

### **The representation of rural women in public life**

The seriousness of the situation cannot be understood without some outline of the current status of women's representation in rural areas. While no accurate figures exist to quantify the numbers of women involved in rural community life (in itself an indication of the under-resourcing of the sector), there are six rural women's networks (Fermanagh, Mid-Ulster, Newry and Mourne, South Armagh and Roe Valley) with approximately 1,500 women affiliated and 10,700 women annually accessing local education through their work. There are few paid workers within the networks, which limits the



capacity of the sector to engage in research and policy development. In addition to the networks there are many other groups of rural women, most of which are badly resourced and dependent on voluntary labour.

Despite their lack of resources, rural women have made a valuable contribution to the promotion of equality and peace building, social and economic development, inclusion and to the overall development of the voluntary sector. It would be inaccurate to claim that women are not represented in the development of rural life. Where they are absent is at the decision-making level. A study by Shortall<sup>1</sup> found that the women's sector in rural areas reaches between ten and twelve thousand women, and women are involved in community development associations and groups in approximately equal numbers to men. This contribution is not acknowledged by those in decision-making capacities as women remain largely absent from key policy areas. For example, on the Rural Stakeholder Forum, 3 of the 21 members are women while 18 are men. The repercussions of this lack of gender parity have meant an absence of gender analysis within rural policy making and service delivery. This lack of a women's perspective is a serious omission and one which we urge the RPA to address as a matter of urgency so that rural women's sector will be empowered to contribute equally to policy development and all key areas of decision-making.

### **Achieving gender parity**

The disaggregated statistics provided by the RPA (p.127) reveal considerable gender inequity within public life, particularly in the upper echelons of bodies, where men hold a higher proportion of senior posts. We note that although the RPA believes that the review 'presents both a challenge and an opportunity to increase the participation of under-represented groups in public life' (p.129) no measures are proposed to redress this imbalance. We urge that a policy similar to that announced by the Irish government in April

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<sup>1</sup> Sally Shortall, *Women in Rural Areas in Northern Ireland*, RCN, 2005.



2005 be adopted, namely, that nominating bodies must put forward both male and female options for appointments to State Boards. The government will choose from among nominees so as to ensure that the 40% minimum representation from both genders is achieved.

For this policy to be effective, the nomination process must be subject to a thorough-going revision. Currently, as Baroness Fritchie has indicated, Northern Ireland has an excess of political nominees. As the majority of nominated councillors are male, the policy severely disadvantages women, rural women most of all, as evidenced by the small numbers of elected women in rural-based councils. We note that the statistics provided within the document do not include gender disaggregated statistics of elected councillors, an omission which disguises the real extent of the problem women face.

The Rural Women's Policy Forum have pointed out that while Dungannon district council has been a model of good practice for power sharing, women are not represented within these power-sharing arrangements. 'Good Practice' must include all forms of equality. To achieve this, we believe that it is necessary to introduce new codes of ethics with the objective of changing standards of behaviour for both politicians and employees. We recommend that such protocols govern sectarian behaviour as well as sexism, racism and other discriminatory language and action. These must include working to ensure gender balance in addition to other forms of power sharing.

### **Political parties**

Without affirmative action women are unlikely to achieve gender parity in either elected or nominated positions. The lack of representation of women, ethnic minorities and the young within local government has been exacerbated by the continued existence of the dual mandate. Women currently make up 22% of councillors, but in some councils the proportion is



far below this average. For example, Strabane Council has only one female representative. It is possible that the overall number of women councillors will be reduced as a result of the reduction in the total number of councillors and measures must be put in place to ensure that this does not occur.

We urge that the dual mandate is phased out, with a definite time-scale announced. However, while this measure will increase the pool of candidates, it will not ensure greater diversity amongst councillors unless government takes the opportunity to include provisions to increase gender balance. We would urge government to take a positive lead in ensuring that parties offer gender-balanced lists of candidates to the electorate. The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 has not yet been used by any political party in Northern Ireland. There should be greater encouragement by government for them to do so.

Positive measures permitted by the legislation includes training and mentoring, techniques such as 'twinning' and 'zipping' and quotas (i.e. all-women short-lists), measures which have been proven to be effective in elections in Scotland and Wales. An increase in the number of women elected would lead to a higher quality of decision-making, reflecting the greater diversity of experience of those making the decisions. There is evidence in the newly devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales that the relatively high number of women has had an impact on their policy agendas. In both bodies, women parliamentarians have championed issues such as childcare, the social economy and equal pay.

### **Local government and the voluntary sector**

While we support the seven council model, accepting the argument that this will minimise the even distribution of wealth bases between councils, we would have preferred an eight council model so that the major urban areas of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry would not swamp their hinterlands. As a



women's organisation we believe it is important to point out that the contraction of councils will have a specific impact on the ability of women to engage with local government. Greater distances, combined with limited public transport in rural areas and lack of access to private transport for many women, are issues that will have to be considered as priorities if the voluntary sector – with women in equal proportions - is to be in a position to develop a meaningful partnership in the manner envisioned by the RPA. The grass-roots expertise of voluntary and community organisations will be invaluable in a number of different ways, particularly in fostering community relations, delivering services, promoting social inclusion and helping to connect people to the larger councils and it is imperative that they are facilitated to do so.

### **Civic councils**

The suggestion that civil councils could act as a bridge between politicians and policy makers is interesting but the gender implications of this are such that civil councils are in danger of being almost solely male in composition and therefore unlikely to further any connection between women's interests and policy makers. We reiterate the importance of ensuring a greater gender balance within future councils and consideration of a meaningful strategy to change the dominant culture within local government. Some suggestions are, removing barriers to women standing for election, ensuring that meetings do not always take place at times difficult for those with caring responsibilities and the provision of childcare facilities within the new council structures.

We believe that the District Policing Partnership appointments could provide a model for Civic Councils, reflecting the make-up of their geographic areas in terms of gender, community background, age and ethnic background. This would enable fundamental change to take place. It could encourage political parties to consider a possible variety in their candidate selection and to persuade new recruits into their parties.



### **Women and employment**

The WRDA is concerned about the implications for women's future employment in the two key areas of health and education. These areas of public life which have seen increased female participation are in the forefront of key areas to be reduced, with worrying consequences for women in work and for the future representation of women in decision-making. We would urge the review process to ensure that transitional arrangements will include a gender audit of workers affected and the introduction of measures to ensure that changes made will not have a disproportionate impact upon women.

The statistics provided by the RPA for local government employees (p.239) do not give the full picture in terms of the place of women in key decision-making areas. Figures supplied by Belfast City Council WINS project reveal that of women employed within local government structures, only 14% occupy places in the top two management tiers and no women is in post as CEO in any district council. Their input into policy making is therefore extremely limited. The review must provide an opportunity to make a radical difference and to bring more women into decision-making positions. If the changes are made within a framework of promoting equality and inclusion, then the future of local government could be more welcoming for all those currently within minority positions. We recommend that work-life balance within local government, including the culture of evening meetings is scrutinised and that the institutionalised sexism so prevalent within many departments is countered by mandatory programmes of gender awareness training. There should be capacity building programmes to prepare people for the new responsibilities within local government and under-represented groups should receive specific encouragement to apply.



### **Young Women**

There is a proposal within the RPA document to move responsibility for youth services from education to the leisure services provided by local government. We believe that this would have a detrimental impact upon the participation of young women and girls within the youth sector. Provision is already limited and a focus upon leisure activities will have the effect of curtailing further their participation. We would also urge that resources are channelled into finding out what youth service provision would be required to meet the needs of young women and girls.

### **The women's sector and civic participation**

We welcome the commitment to partnership working between public, private and voluntary sectors in the proposed new arrangements and we hope that our comments will provide evidence for the importance of ensuring that a commitment to gender parity in all institutional arrangements will be a core principle of the changes in the administrative structures of Northern Ireland. The rural community sector generally does not have a strong voice in public life. For true partnership, greater resources will be required. Community planning in a rural context needs to include the existing rural community infrastructure, gender proofed to ensure that the voices of women are heard. The existing gender balance in many Local Strategy Partnerships does not provide evidence that women's views are adequately taken into account. Limavady and Strabane, both with only 18% women and Cookstown with 28% are indicative of the need to consider strategies to improve representation.

The RPA team have stated that amongst the themes that emerged from their research is 'the need to involve communities and people, especially those marginalised or disadvantaged, in decisions that affect services in their area through partnership and strengthened civic leadership.' As we have indicated in our opening comments, this is work that is already being undertaken, often



without adequate resources, by the women's sector. Although the RPA has indicated that the community and voluntary sector's role 'will develop in scale and importance', we believe that we have demonstrated that greater resources are necessary for this to be possible. Women's organisations are dependent on short-term funding, with no government support for child-care.

There can only be partnership if there is some kind of equality, both in terms of resources and in terms of representation. The RPA consultation admits the difficulties for women in this area, but offers no way forward. Research with focus groups leads to the conclusion that 'women feel they have much less influence than men on decisions on public services' (p.124). The RPA team have proposed that the issues highlighted in the initial consideration of equality, social need, human rights and rural issues will be discussed in further consultation with 'S75 categories', which 'may provide opportunities to...provide an opportunity to address under-represented groups in public life'. (p.117)

Government has entered international commitments with regards to the promotion of women's equality and these must be recognised and honoured. CEDAW states that governments must 'commit themselves to positive action to advance the equality of women in decision-making'. UN Resolution 1325 calls for measures to be implemented to enable women to participate on an equal basis in decision-making, including the task of post-conflict reconstruction. Greater resources will enable more women to facilitate discussions within their own communities and to disseminate the results of such consultations. It will also enable women to participate more fully in neighbourhood organisations and, as a longer-term strategy, that increased level of engagement at strategic levels of decision-making will have many positive benefits for the future governance of Northern Ireland.



## **The Women's Resource and Development Agency**

In conclusion, the WRDA urges those responsible for implementing the changes to our local government and public administration to demonstrate political commitment to achieving gender balance in all future institutions.