



Social Investment Fund

Consultation

Issued by Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

September 2011

Women's Resource and Development Agency
6 Mount Charles
Belfast
BT7 1NZ
Tel: 028 9023 0212
Email: vilma.bisson@wrda.net

Introduction

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 transform political, economic, social, and cultural conditions'. The organisation was established in 1983 and works with women's groups from all traditions in the most severely disadvantaged communities, and from urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland. We work from the grass roots to the highest levels of policymaking and politics, providing advocacy and lobbying support. WRDA is a membership organisation with over 400 members comprised of Women's Groups, Organisations, and individual members.

High Level Aims

WRDA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the proposed operation of the Social Investment Fund. Whilst we agree with the high level aims and the strategic objectives presented in this consultation, WRDA would contend that the Department should develop a cross-cutting theme of 'women' when designing the Social Investment Fund.

WRDA has recently published a report 'The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge?'¹ highlighting the precarious position of women following the economic crisis and providing a robust evidence base demonstrating women's position in terms of the economy, employment, childcare, pensions, welfare, debt and credit, and housing and fuel debt. It details the impact on specific groups of women such as younger women, lone parents, migrant women and older women. This report gives an insight into the multiple disadvantages impacting upon women and shows the need for projects aimed at alleviating the many hardships shouldered by women.

Within the current mandate of the Coalition Government, money raised through direct tax, benefits, pay and pensions totals £18.9 billion, two thirds (£13.2 billion) of which comes directly from women. In the Autumn Statement by the Chancellor, women are yet again disproportionately impacted by government cuts. Yvette Cooper cites the House of Commons Library research "Of £2.37 billion announced yesterday in measures which directly affect personal income, 73 per cent will come from women, and 27 per

¹ WRDA Report (2011) *The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge?*, Bronagh Hinds (p117) Available at <http://www.wrda.net/Documents/The%20NI%20Economy%20-%20Women%20on%20the%20Edge%20Report.pdf>

cent from men”². WRDA urge the Northern Ireland government to help rebalance this by using some of the Social Investment Fund for women’s projects.

Strategic Objectives

A report by the Women’s Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP)³ identified lack of appropriate childcare as the single biggest barrier to women’s participation in education, training and work, as well as public and political life. Childcare services, as they exist in Northern Ireland, are patchy with rural areas having very limited access to these. The cost of childcare is prohibitive for many women resulting in them depending on family members or friends for informal childcare. The Childcare Cost Survey (2011)⁴ shows that the average annual childcare cost is £8,021 per child. For many families on low incomes with two or more children, this means that one person’s salary is spent on childcare. For lone parents, this cost is a huge factor when deciding firstly whether to work and secondly how many hours they can afford to work. Following the Coalition Government’s decision to reduce the proportion of childcare costs, payable through claiming the childcare element of Working Tax Credit (from 80 percent to 70 percent), more families will be struggling to pay for childcare. WRDA are concerned that without the development of the Childcare Strategy women will be disadvantaged and will be less likely to participate in educational/employment programmes. WRDA urge OFMdfM to prioritise the Childcare Strategy and to ensure that it provides accessible, affordable and available childcare for everyone. WRDA suggest that some of this Fund is used to uphold existing childcare and to provide childcare in areas where there is none.

In order to widen access to the labour market, it is essential that women are included. The Caring Jigsaw⁵ demonstrates the importance of educating women in order to impact positively on the whole family leading to an increase in the level of employment, higher wages, and a higher level of educational attainment for children. This is seen to be a cost/benefit efficient model for alleviating cyclical deprivation.

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/dec/01/child-poverty-target-changes-coalition>

³ H McLaughlin (2009) *Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation*, Report written on behalf of WCRP, pg 37.

⁴ Employers For Childcare (2011) *Northern Ireland Childcare Cost Survey 2011*

⁵ Liddell, C. (2010) *The Caring Jigsaw* Report written on behalf of Save the Children

The WRDA report demonstrates that young women leaving school with no qualifications are the worst affected by unemployment, across both genders and all age groups, with an unemployment rate of 46 percent. These young women have a limited access to work-related training. At the end of June 2011, 76 percent of participants on the Steps to Work programme were male⁶. Women who are unable to enter the labour market when young may find that, due to caring responsibilities, inadequate and expensive childcare, and low wages, they are unable to enter it in later life impacting on their level of income, self-development and later their pension status. This creates a cycle of disadvantage and poverty in their lives. WRDA urge that some of the Social Investment Fund is directed to helping these women break this cycle through community education programmes run in women's centres such as the Learner Access Engagement Pilot Programme ran in the North West by a consortium of Women's Centres. Women's Centres Regional Partnerships published a report into this programme which states "the success of the Women's Centres in attracting participants to the DEL initiative, the Learner Access & Engagement Programme (LAEP) is due to the unique support mechanisms put in place such as access to childcare, 1:1 support, small class sizes, and a welcoming, safe and inclusive environment."⁷

WRDA stress the importance of using the Social Investment Fund to increase the percentage of women participating in the economy, given that women have higher rates of economic inactivity than men. Currently the male inactivity rate is around 23%, whilst the female rate is 37%⁸.

Women are at greater risk of deprivation as they are socially and economically positioned differently to men due to their caring responsibilities, gender pay gap, part-time working patterns, and having little or no savings. Research shows that the proportion of women in deprivation is nearly twice that of men in Northern Ireland⁹. When families are living in deprivation, women often go without basic necessities such

⁶ Department of Employment and Learning (2011) *Statistical Bulletin: Steps to Work* Available at http://www.delni.gov.uk/steps_to_work_statistical_bulletin_statistics_to_june_2011_media.pdf

⁷ WCRP (2011) *A Review of the North West Women's Centres Learner Access and Engagement Programme* Available at http://www.wcrp.org.uk/cms/data/upimages/WCRP_LEAP_North_West_review_report_FINAL__PDF_Document_Nov_2011.pdf

⁸ <http://www.delni.gov.uk/es/lmb2004-8.pdf>

⁹ Borooah, V. (2005) "Bridging the Gap Between the Measurement of Poverty and of Deprivation" *Applied Economics Letters* 12:383-89

as food to enable their children to have what they need. Recent figures released by the Department of Social Development show a 3 percent increase in child poverty in Northern Ireland with 28 percent of children (122,000) living in poverty¹⁰.

WRDA urges that, when tackling issues linked to deprivation, the Social Investment Fund takes cognisance of existing gender inequalities and that it will develop projects that help to alleviate the severe impact of the economic crisis upon women. In order to reduce the level of deprivation and to tackle the root causes of it, projects benefitting women must be considered, as helping women helps the entire family especially children and young people.

WRDA urge OFMdFM to consider, when thinking of early intervention, to be aware of the young women finishing school with little or no qualifications who have limited potential for employment or training. Unless these girls are given assistance to progress, they will be caught in a cycle of deprivation and in turn their children are likely to end up in the same situation.

Investment Zones

WRDA are concerned that disadvantage and deprivation are regarded as spatial issues. Deprivation can and does occur in areas not classified as having multiple deprivations. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), when discussing area-based measures, states that not all deprived people live in deprived areas¹¹. By using a spatial element there will be people omitted from programmes that should be included. Rural areas are greatly affected by this as they barely feature in the top 20 percent of Super Output Areas (SOA) using the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2010 (NIMDM).

Women's groups and women's centres are not all located in areas defined as deprived yet the women and families who use these groups are often disadvantaged, in poverty, lacking education/training, or suffer ill health. It is unfair and unequal to base funding to tackle disadvantage solely on a geographical basis. WRDA stress the necessity of broadening the criteria used to decide where there is disadvantage and need to incorporate those who may live in the same super output area as affluent people but who may in reality be worse off than a person living in the top SOA. It is vital to

¹⁰ <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/index/media-centre/news-departments/news-dsd/news-dsd-021211-households-below-average.htm>

¹¹ http://www.nisra.gov.uk/deprivation/NIMDM2010/using_area_based_measures.pdf

address the needs of those who are severely disadvantaged but do not qualify for many programmes/projects due to the geographical area in which they live.

Management Structures

A major concern for WRDA is in relation to the proposed structure of the Steering Groups. In Northern Ireland, 51 percent of the population are women yet only 3 percent of women are engaged in entrepreneurial activity and five percent of female employees are managers and/or senior employees in comparison to 10 percent of male employees. Thirty four percent of public appointments are held by women, out of one hundred and eighteen public bodies there are nineteen chair posts and eight deputy chair posts held by women. There are only 18.5 percent women MLAs and 23.5 percent local councillors.¹² Women are not equally represented in business/private sector or political decision-making roles and therefore this is likely to be replicated in terms of representation on steering groups.

In order to fairly represent women on steering groups OFMdfM must ensure that a gender balance is procured. WRDA consider that Option 1 "OFMdfM will identify community and stakeholder groups to form 'conventions'. The groups or agencies will then nominate members to the Steering Group" is the best option when considering the method for establishing Steering Groups. It is essential that women will have a voice on these steering groups; their lived experiences are often very different from men and it is crucial that they are represented in equal numbers on these groups. Another consideration lies in the need to promote community stability and for this we would advocate investing in the participation of women.

WRDA wish to tentatively raise a further issue. We are unsure if it is 'good practice' to have politicians represented on the steering groups and have some concern that 'vested interests' may arise.

Delivery of Funding

WRDA note that the Social Investment Fund resources are to be supplementary to existing resources which raises concern that the mechanisms used to deliver the Fund will lead to duplication and could overburden groups who are able to deliver the

¹² NISRA (2011) *Women in Northern Ireland: September 2011*

strategic outcomes. Because of this, WRDA consider that Option 2 (the community model) would be the best approach as the money can be more readily targeted at those in greatest need. However, we feel that the final decision on proposals should rest with the Office of the First and deputy First Minister rather than with the Steering Groups.

Equality Impact

WRDA are disturbed that the equality impact assessment lacks any mention of the impact of the current economic situation upon women. Women's position in society makes it harder for them to withstand the impact of public spending and welfare cuts. The WRDA report ¹³ evidences the impact of this on women especially certain groups – lone parents, young women, migrant women and older women.

Without an awareness of the position of women who are disadvantaged and then further impacted upon by government cuts, loss of jobs, and increasing inflation, it is impossible to meet the aims and objectives of this Fund. As the aims of this Fund are to tackle poverty, unemployment and physical deterioration, it is necessary to have a comprehensible and evident commitment to promoting equality. Section 75 of the NI Act (1998) ensures that Government Departments have a statutory obligation to analyse the impact of policies on inequalities and to minimise any disproportionate impact.

WRDA believe that due to women's structurally unequal position in society there is a need for the Social Investment Fund to consider the benefits and the strategic outcomes that could be met if a proportion of the Fund is aimed specifically at women. WRDA are happy to discuss this further.

¹³ WRDA Report (2011) *The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge?*, Bronagh Hinds (p117) Available at <http://www.wrda.net/Documents/The%20NI%20Economy%20-%20Women%20on%20the%20Edge%20Report.pdf>