



# Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP)

Response to the

## Review of the re-establishment of a Civic Forum for Northern Ireland

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## 1.0 Introduction

- 1.0 The Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) is a partnership of four lead regional women's organisations linking with fourteen frontline women's organisations across Northern Ireland providing support and services to disadvantaged areas.
- 1.1 The four key lead partners of the Partnership are the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), Women's Support Network (WSN), Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) and The Women's Centre, Derry. The fourteen Women's Centres are spread across Northern Ireland with seven from the Greater Belfast and Lisburn area, four in the North West and three in Dungannon, Magherafelt and Craigavon. Together the WCRP seeks to develop and strengthen a regional infrastructure which will support community based women's organisations across Northern Ireland.
- 1.2 We welcome the opportunity to respond to the review of the Civic Forum for Northern Ireland.
- 1.3 Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) endorses the re-establishment of a Civic Forum. WCRP holds the view that this is a positive step forward in enhancing civic participation within Northern Ireland. However in order to ensure that the Civic Forum is an effective body, we strongly believe that the role and purpose of the Forum should be clearly defined from the outset.
- 1.4 The value that a meaningful Civic Forum would bring to Northern Ireland should not be lost in this review period. It is important that our Politicians recognise the real benefits that a Civic Forum will add to their decision making processes. The Forum would provide a composite 'community voice' that would readily expedite the two way communication between Government Departments, Politicians, and the citizens and communities of Northern Ireland. The Forum would allow for a more appropriate twenty-first century democracy, more resonant of public values of local control, civic participation, inclusion, and transparency.
- 1.5 WCRP advocate that the case for a Civic Forum should be to make Northern Ireland politics more user friendly and improve access to political debate for marginalised sectors. Historically female representation at a political level has always been poor. Currently women comprise 17% of the Northern Ireland Assembly, 21% of local Councillors and 32% of the membership of public bodies. Therefore the issue of appropriate gender

representation needs to be integral to the re-establishment of a Civic Forum.

- 1.6 The original Forum membership did not meet the degree of gender balance as promised in The Good Friday Agreement, with women only making up 36% of the membership. Substantive representation, is needed to enable the opportunities and concerns of women to be heard and taken into account. The ethos and principles of a newly established Civic Forum should be based on equal opportunities, inclusiveness, accountability, transparency and effectiveness.

## **2.0 Definitions of a Civic Forum**

- 2.1 A Civic Forum is considered to be an independent voice which is characterised by several different, and sometimes conflicting, roles and objectives. A Civic Forum may be considered to be a bridge or gatekeeper between elected representatives and civic society, but may, at times, also act as a force to lobby the elected representatives Lindsay, (2000).

- 2.2 Isobel Lindsay, pioneer and Vice-Convenor of the Scottish Civic Forum, describes a Civic Forum as a mechanism to enable a more interactive dialogue in standard consultation exercises and suggests that it can create a space for civic debate. SDLP member Carmel Hanna argues that:

*'[A] Civic Forum can broaden and deepen the political and public process by bringing in a rich diversity of viewpoints to discussions about matters of public policy'* (Lindsay, 2000).

Lindsay suggests that a Civic Forum should be flexible, and that particular roles and objectives may alter over time to correspond with changes in civic society or the political systems.

- 2.3 The purpose of the Civic Forum when originally established was not widely understood and its deliberations attracted only limited attention in the wider community. It had only a limited public profile, presumably due to the relatively short-term time of its existence.

## **3.0 Roles of a Civic Forum**

On examining the definitions of a Civic Forum a number of key roles emerge:

- 3.1 The importance of Independence  
The relationship between the Forum and the Northern Ireland Assembly should be clearly defined to avoid confusion over its purpose, role and duties. The Forum needs to be an independent body, that has powers to

influence policy decisions. The membership to statutory bodies, local authorities and political parties to the Forum should not be permitted.

### 3.2 Inclusive/ Representative

It's imperative that the Civic Forum reflects grass-roots opinion. A bottom-up approach to inform policy responses is required. Representing a mosaic of communities, occupations, cultures, and perspectives. It's important that there are opportunities to voice differing opinions, however provide a collective voice on key concerns and issues.

### 3.3 Gatekeeper/Gateway

To bridge the gap between the Northern Ireland Assembly and electorate.

### 3.4 Consultative

That consultation simply does not become a formality and there is a demonstration that consultation on policy issues does make a difference. Gender mainstreaming should be integral to policy responses, in order to be advocating the need of inclusiveness and equality.

### 3.5 Advisory

The role of the Civic Forum, should be that of a 'critical friend', providing constructive advice on key policy issues.

### 3.6 Engagement

Engagement should be a 2-way process, seeking grass roots opinions and politic engagement.

### 3.7 Awareness raising

Raising awareness on various issues which may affect civic society. The Forum should therefore be proactive as well as reactive. It should be in a position to spot emerging trends and issues and alert its members to them.

### 3.8 Flexible and open

The Forum should be flexible and able to respond to evolving social conditions and possible changes to the devolution settlement, providing a responsive style of governance.

## 4.0 Membership and Representation of Women

4.1 WCRP contends that regardless of which model is decided upon that it should be a model which promotes equality and diversity, in particular one that promotes equality of opportunity between men and women. Women have played a role in the development of Civic Forum in NI, for example the Women's Coalition proposed a Civic Forum for NI at talks leading to the Good Friday Agreement. Meehan (2001).

- 4.2 Why is it important for equal gender representation in a Civic Forum? At the heart of this question, is the challenge of equality. The ethos of a Civic Forum should be to facilitate greater engagement between sectors in civic society, particularly with those who have been historically excluded. In order to ensure that a Civic Forum is representative of the population, achieving a gender balance is imperative. Women make up 51 % of the population of Northern Ireland (Census, 2001). It is important that the differences between men and women are recognised and the implications on policies need to be considered through a gender lens. WCRP believes that this can only be achieved by having a suitable and a substantial gender representation, to ensure that the voice and concerns of women are heard and considered. A key role of the Civic Forum should be to provide a source of information on how citizens have perceived their experiences of participation. The concerns and issues of women, as with any sector are best voiced from within. WCRP holds the view that the lack of gender parity that exists throughout Northern Irish society is a key factor in hindering the development of a new, shared future. Women indeed hold primary responsibility for the maintenance of families. This work has serious resource implications for education, health and public spending, areas about which women have particular insights. WCRP thus argue, that women's primary responsibilities in this sphere should privilege their involvement in setting priorities and informing policy decisions.
- 4.3 WCRP would contend that although it is beneficial to consider models from other jurisdictions (see appendix 1), that there should be a mechanism put in place which reflects the diversity of sectors in Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland as a society coming out of conflict.
- 4.4 WCRP would like to highlight Resolution 1325 (see appendix 2) which “urges Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict.” The Council of Europe (see appendix 2) similarly advocates balanced participation of men and women in public bodies. Furthermore, one of the objectives of the Gender Equality Strategy is “to ensure the active and equal participation of women and men at all levels of civil society, economy, peace building and government.” WCRP would urge OFMDFM to give consideration as to how there will be equality of opportunity between men and women in any new mechanism for engagement between Government and Civil Society.
- 4.5 WCRP would also contend that in any model of engagement between Civil Society and Government, that there should be a representative from the Women’s Sector to represent the views of women, particularly ‘hard to reach’, marginalised women.

## **5.0 Funding**

5.1 Section 56 of The Northern Ireland Act 1998 sets out that the expenses of the forum should be defrayed as expenses by the Department of Finance and Personnel. WCRP contends that for any mechanism to be effective, it will need to be properly resourced. This should include support for expenses, secretariat and research. It is well documented that the Community and Voluntary sector faces huge financial constraints. It is essential that in order to achieve effective participation, Community and Voluntary representatives receive financial support, to enable them to participate on an equal basis with other groups in the Forum. The ethos of the return of a Civic Forum is to bring the voice of the community to the decision making table. In order to ensure the effective participation of Community and Voluntary representatives on a Forum, financial support is a necessary component.

## Appendices

## **Appendix 1**

### **Civic Forums UK and Irish Models**

It may be beneficial to consider Civic Forum models from other jurisdictions for example in devolved jurisdictions such as Scotland and Wales, local government models such as London and in other jurisdictions such as the Republic of Ireland.

#### **The Scottish Civic Forum**

The Scottish Civic Forum was established in 1999. WCRP understands that the Scottish Executive withdrew funding for the Forum and has ceased to exist since 2005. However when in existence, the Forum's activities included "monitoring the Parliament and Executive, publishing an annual audit on participation, encouraging legislative participation through policy forums and public dialogue, training and guidance on participation, promoting and identifying civic priorities and producing publications." Church, Visser (2001).

#### **Wales**

Wales does not have a Civic Forum but has a Voluntary Sector Partnership Council (VSPC) comprised of the Minister with responsibility for the Voluntary Sector, 24 representatives of the Voluntary Sector and 3 representatives from Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA). The purpose of the VSPC is to provide engagement between the voluntary sector and the Welsh Assembly. The effectiveness of the VSPC has been called into question as it only meets twice a year and proposals have been made for a Civil Society Forum for Wales. However this has not come to fruition.

#### **The London Civic Forum (LCF)**

The London Civic Forum (LCF) provides engagement between civil society, the Mayor and the London Assembly. It is comprised of 1300 members from private, public and voluntary sector and membership is free and can be obtained on application to the forum. The purpose of the LCF is "to promote civic engagement to decision making and policy makers and communities, to offer learning and networking opportunities on citizenship and policy themes, to provide information on London's Governance, to scrutinise the work of the institutions involved in London's governance, to reduce barriers to participation in London's governance processes, to contribute to policy debates and consultations."

#### **Republic of Ireland**

The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) was established in the Republic of Ireland in 1973 and is made up of a chairman appointed by Government in consultation with the NESC, five members nominated by agricultural and farming organisations, five nominated by business and employer organisations, five nominated by Irish Congress of Trade Unions, and five nominated by the Voluntary and Community Sector. There are also ten

representatives nominated by the government, which include Secretary Generals from various Government departments and a representative from local government.

The purpose of the NESC is to analyse and report to the Taoiseach on a number of issues, such as economic development, social justice and agreements between the government and its social partners

## Appendix 2 UN Resolution 1325/The Council of Europe

### UN Resolution 1325

On 31 October 2000 the UN adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, a ground breaking international law that has become a vital rally point for organisations and individuals across the world. UN 1325 calls for the full and equal participation of women in all peace and security initiatives.

Resolution 1325 marks the first time the Security Council addressed the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women, recognized the under-valued and under-utilized contributions women make to conflict prevention, peacekeeping, conflict resolution and peace-building, and stressed the importance of their equal and full participation as active agents in peace and security.

UN Resolution 1325 recognizes:

***women's important role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and ...the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution (United Nations, 2000).***

### The Council of Europe

The Council of Europe have developed a set of guidelines to help member states to promote and increase participation of women in decision-making, in the field of conflict prevention and resolution.

Recommendation Rec (2003) 3 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making was adopted on 12 March 2003.

It recommends that the governments of member states:

- I. commit themselves to promote balanced representation of women and men by recognising publicly that the equal sharing of decision-making power between women and men of different background and ages strengthens and enriches democracy;
- II. protect and promote the equal civil and political rights of women and men, including running for office and freedom of association;

III. ensure that women and men can exercise their individual voting rights and, to this end, take all the necessary measures to eliminate the practice of family voting;

IV. review their legislation and practice, with the aim of ensuring that the strategies and measures described in this recommendation are applied and implemented;

V. promote and encourage special measures to stimulate and support women's will to participate in political and public decision making;

VI. consider setting targets linked to a time scale with a view to reaching balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making;

VII. ensure that this recommendation is brought to the attention of all relevant political institutions and to public and private bodies, in particular national parliaments, local and regional authorities, political parties, civil service, public and semi-public organisations, enterprises, trade unions, employers' organisations and non-governmental organisations;

VIII. monitor and evaluate progress in achieving balanced participation of women and men in political and public life, and report regularly to the Committee of Ministers on the measures taken and progress made in this field.

## **Resources/references**

### **Organisations**

Scottish Civic Forum, 21 Queen Street, Edinburgh, EH2 1JX,  
Scotland, [www.civicforum.org.uk](http://www.civicforum.org.uk)

The Common Wealth Foundation, Marlborough House, Pall Mall,  
London, SW1Y 5HY, United Kingdom,  
[www.commonwealthfoundation.com](http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com)

The London Civic Forum, 18A Victoria Park Square, London E2  
9PB, England, [http://62.7.246.144/lcf\\_about.asp](http://62.7.246.144/lcf_about.asp)

The National Economic and Social Forum, First Floor, Frederick

### **Bibliography**

Civic Forum for Northern Ireland, January 2001, 'Response to the Northern Ireland Executive Draft Programme for Government dated October 2000', Civic Forum for Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland.

Lindsay, I. (2000), 'The New Civic Forums', Political Quarterly, Vol. 71 (4), pp. 404-411.

Meehan E, From Government to Governance, October 2003, Civic Participation and 'New Politics'; the Context of Potential Opportunities for the better Representation of Women. Occasional Paper No 5, Pg 16. Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics, School of Politics and International Studies, Queens University, Belfast.

### **Websites**

Census, 2001

<http://www.nisranew.nisra.gov.uk/census/Census2001Output/KeyStatistics/keystats.html>

UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, General Recommendation 23

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm#recom23>

UN Resolution 1325

[http://www.un.org/events/res\\_1325e.pdf](http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf).

<http://www.peacewomen.org/un/sc/1325.html>

Recommendation Rec (2003) 3 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making

[http://www.coe.int/T/E/Human\\_Rights/Equality/03. Women\\_and\\_decision-making/](http://www.coe.int/T/E/Human_Rights/Equality/03_Women_and_decision-making/)

OFMDFMNI Gender Equality Strategy

<http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/genderequalitystrategy2006-2016.pdf>