



A submission to the consultation on -

**“A Careers Education,
Information, Advice and
Guidance Strategy for
Northern Ireland”**

**Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Education**

December 2007

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The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an infrastructural umbrella organisation, which provides support and services to, and represents over 30 groups (mostly in the Greater Belfast area), including community-based women's centres, women's projects and women's infrastructure groups.

WSN aims to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network aims to strengthen the collective voice of women's groups and to promote and develop networking opportunities, to enable collective action and to impact upon policy and decision making processes. We provide an accessible, relevant and high quality support service and resource for member groups. The Network is also an important information provider on issues relevant to community-based women's organisations and for other infrastructure groups, nationally and internationally.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this important consultation on the Department of Employment and Learning's Careers Education, Information, Advice Strategy for Northern Ireland. Before answering the ten prescribed questions we would like to make a more general response to the document.

While there are connections with the Department's "Success Through Skills" strategy and the Department of Education's "Entitled 2 Succeed" programme both of which highlight the need for an independent all-age strategy for lifelong careers advice in Northern Ireland, WSN is surprised and concerned that the strategy is essentially gender-blind. It does not acknowledge or mirror the work DfES has undertaken with stakeholders who focus on gender equality, such as the EOC, in developing Quality Standards for Young People's Information, Advice and Guidance which will be implemented in April 2008

We are further concerned that the document totally ignores the issue of occupational segregation. There is no mention of either the DfES report *Challenging Gender Barriers* (2006) nor, even more surprisingly, any link with the national '*Shaping a Fairer Future*' policy document. This, in our opinion is a missed opportunity. The lack of gender-awareness is also rather disappointing in the context of recent research into women's experience in the workplace. The Women and Work Commission, commissioned by the Prime Minister in 2004, investigated the gender pay and opportunities gap which resulted in the production of '*Shaping a Fairer Future*' (2006) report. The report details 40 recommendations to tackle the problem of gender stereo-typing and occupational segregation. While many of the issues covered remain reserved to Westminster, 10 recommendations have been identified as requiring implementation by the devolved regional governments. Two of these recommendations have clear and important links with the CEIAG strategy and are cited to be implemented by DEL in the Northern Ireland Action Plan. (OFMDFM, 2007:9)

Recommendation 5:

'To ensure that teachers training emphasises the need to challenge gender stereotypes, both in delivery of careers education and in subject teaching, and that it

allows for a work placement for all trainee teachers, including observing workers in non-traditional occupations.’

And recommendation 6:

‘To ensure that all young people have access to carers information, advice and guidance which conforms to national standards in that it

1. Challenges gender stereotypes;
2. Gives young people a real understanding of the pay, rewards and challenges of occupations, particularly those not traditionally taken up by their gender.’

WSN believes that stronger and more visible links need to be made between this Action Plan emanating from the Women and Work Commission report, the current Gender Equality Strategy (OFMDFM) and the CEIAG strategy.

OFMDFM also recently (December 2006) published its long-term *Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2006-2016*. The policy’s first objective is:

To ensure the economic security of both men and women and address the gender inequalities which lead to poverty and promote social inclusion, particularly acknowledging women’s vulnerability to poverty e.g. Lone parents, carers, low earners, inadequate pensions. (Gender and Sexual Orientation Equality Unit OFMDFM: 2007:5)

Much has been made of the advances of young women in education and work since the equality legislation of the 1970s. Girls out-perform their male counterparts in GCSEs and ‘A’ Levels and are more likely to enter higher education. However, recent research found that ‘the illusion of choice created by the marketisation of education masks the continued retrenchment of traditional forms of inequality’; both gender and class still impact on the occupational routes open to young women.¹ We hope that the commodification of careers advice does not also perpetuate inequity in the labour market. The OFMDFM (2007) first Annual Report on progress made on ‘Shaping A Fairer Future’ in NI argues that we have not yet reached a level of gender equality at which government policies can safely become gender-blind.

The gender pay gap is a complex issue and overlaps with a range of issues including; work-life balance, flexible working, *subject and career choice*, promotion and career progression, pay systems and tackling low pay. (Gender and Sexual Orientation Equality Unit OFMDFM: 2007:4) (emphasis added)

Disparities exist in both pay and the types of work in which men and women engage. Many women experience both horizontal and vertical segregation – men and women work in different types of work and women work in lower status jobs than do men. The pay gap varies from 7% of the average pay to 24% based on the average where women work part-time and men work full time. The Women and Work Commission report found that women continue to be crowded into a narrow range of low-paying occupations, make up the majority of people in low-skilled jobs, are

¹ Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; McCartney, 2004

more likely to work part-time and are very under-represented in senior positions in the public and private sector. (McCarthy, 2004, *Belfast Telegraph*, 2005). More than half (57%) of part-time working women work in the three lowest paying occupations. The latest figures for the Jobskills programme illustrate that a very small minority of males and females choose non-traditional occupations. (Briefing Paper No 1 Women, Education, Work and Lifelong Learning 2006) Girls are concentrated in administration and beauty while boys are concentrated in the engineering and trades sectors. Careers guidance must proactively tackle gender stereotyping in the labour market in order to challenge these structural trends.

Academic research has found that the gendering of paid and unpaid work takes place early in life through the role models children adopt, traditional social attitudes and the gendered curriculum of schools, colleges and early work experience. For girls this is shop and hotel and catering work, for boys – delivery work and manual labour. (McAlister, Gray and Neil 2007) The above evidence would suggest that the issue of gender should be one of the priorities informing a strategy for careers guidance for girls who are still in the education.

As the programme for careers advice is targeted at people of all ages as Northern Ireland needs to move from a low skills (24% of the population have no educational qualifications) to a high skills economy in order to compete in the global market, it is impossible to construct a viable programme without looking at the special needs of women ‘returners’. The issue of affordable childcare is inextricably linked to any discussion of women’s opportunities. This is especially important for working-class women who left school with no qualifications and have had an interrupted relationship with the labour market and a negative experience with traditional forms of education. *Shaping a Fairer Future* points out that these women need ‘access to confidence-building measures, including peer group support, perhaps delivered through local community groups.’ It is hoped that the frequently mentioned ‘CEIAG community’ includes women’s centres and groups. WSN is concerned as to how this strategy will impact on women living in disadvantaged areas – women who avail of the services of the women’s centres, especially the education and training provision.

A focus on challenging women’s *de facto* exclusion from some occupations also makes financial sense especially in today’s climate where economics take precedence over people. The Women and Work Commission estimate that in the UK if the barriers to women working in occupations traditionally done by men were to be removed and if women’s participation in the labour market were to increase the economy would benefit by ‘between £15 billion and £23 billion or 1.3 to 2.0 per cent of GDP’. (WWC Towards a Fairer Future, 2007:3)

For all the above reasons and in the interest of equity, fairness, and economic sense WSN argues that gender must be made a central issue in the provision of CEIAG strategy.

10. CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

1. Do the proposals to develop Labour Market Information and to develop the Careers Service website as an information hub, meet the needs of clients and the CEIAG community? (pages 24-26)

While these proposals have many positive aspects there is no gendered dimension. The WWC recommended that 'careers literature and on-line career resources that challenge gender stereotypes should be targeted at parents and carers'. Will this be the case? Will there be assistance for women who have few educational qualifications and/or are not computer literate to access the website? Will there be web-based job matching of those wanting to work part-time with those offering quality jobs on a part-time or job share basis?

2. What are your views on the proposals in relation to the provision of Careers Advice and Guidance for Young People? (pages 26-28)

It is good to see that there will be a partnership model as careers advice in schools has traditionally been associated with teachers' assumptions of their pupils' career options being predicated upon class and gender. Recent EOC research (2002) found that 'irrespective of their academic achievements, girls generally hold lower career aspirations than boys and express a greater preference for traditionally sex-typed occupations.' *Towards a Fairer Future* points out that many girls and young women follow traditional routes in education and training. Ruth Kelly, the then Communities Secretary and Minister for Women, brought in a framework which would 'ensure that children's horizons are not limited by outdated assumptions about the types of jobs men and women can do' (2007: 5) Will careers advice for young people deliver this change? Paragraph 7.6.9 recognises year 10 subject choice as a 'key transition' point. It is therefore an opportunity to challenge traditional notions that 'arbitrarily restrict people's choices' and lead women out of low paid, low status work.

3. Do you support the proposals to provide different levels of service in Careers Resource Centres, depending on client need i.e. self-help, brief staff-assist, and individual case-managed services? (pages 28-31)

Yes, we support this type of individualised service rather than a 'one size fits all' approach as long as the advice is truly impartial and not predicated on assumptions of what is an appropriate career choice based on a client's perceived class and gender. While the new centres will be available to all adults we have a number of concerns: will there be a level of compulsion for those who have a history of long-term benefit dependency? How will women be able to access the new 'Careers Resource Centres'? Will they have crèche provision? This is very important if they are to be accessible to women living in disadvantaged areas and particularly lone parents. Will 'outreach services' be available to those residing in disadvantaged areas? Is it possible that

Women's Centres and Community Centres will have a role to play in this service – can it be adequately funded and staffed to ensure 'immediate assistance' to those in most need?

4. What are your views on the proposals in relation to the provision of Careers Advice and Guidance for Adults? (pages 28-31)

It is a very positive policy to provide this service to all adults providing that it is adequately resourced and sensitive to issues of class, gender, disability, race, and locality.

5. What are your views on the proposals in relation to the provision of Careers Advice and Guidance for Young People and Adults vulnerable to social exclusion? (pages 31-32)

We are concerned that there no mention of 'women returners' as a group with specific needs? The Women and Work Commission point out that this group need to have access to 'confidence-building measures, including peer support, perhaps through local community groups.' WSN's experience with women suffering from multiple disadvantages leads us to suggest that careers guidance and information must be linked to community education and training provision. It is also surprising to note the absence of lone parents in the target groups. It is well established that families headed by a lone parent are at risk of poverty and social exclusion and the DWP project on Employment Retention and Advancement (piloted in six Jobcentre Plus districts) is testing the interventions designed to improve retention and advancement for those on the margins of the labour market – there is a clear focus on women who are lone parents. Why is this vulnerable group excluded from the list of those in need of special attention? In Northern Ireland we have an increasing number of people from ethnic minority groups – will special attention be available to women who have language problems and who are vulnerable to social exclusion and poverty? There is little hope for women, who have caring responsibilities for children and other relatives, gaining access to good quality careers advice if they are unable to take up employment if it is inflexible or/and there is no availability of child care. The Labour Government promises work for those who can and security for those who cannot. This level of advice provision is, we hope, empowering for vulnerable members of society, however, it raises the question – will there be a degree of compulsion for these young people and adults to engage in the labour force under any conditions or lose their benefits?

6. Do you consider that the proposals in relation to the implementation of quality assurance indicators and the matrix Standard will address concerns about the quality of CEIAG provision? (pages 32-34)

Again, the theory looks good and we hope that reality matches its aspirations.

7. Do you support the formation of a forum of CEIAG delivery partners? (page 35)

Yes, we would support the formation of this type of forum so long as it fulfils the Government's longstanding commitment to introduce a duty on public bodies, to promote

equality of opportunity between women and men rather than simply eliminating unlawful discrimination between them.

8. What are your views on the proposals to develop flagship Careers Resource Centres and offer services under the Extended School provision? (pages 36-38)

This provision has both advantages – a high level of excellence in four centres in each county plus several peripheral venues, and disadvantages - Will it result in a two tier system? Will adults who have had a negative experience of compulsory education i.e. those in most need, access the system? Also it is not clear how ‘extended schools’ provision will work in practice.

9. Do you agree that a review of the provision of work-based learning opportunities, for staff involved in careers provision, is required? (pages 38-40)

We support this and hope that the various partners engage in similar initiatives to that of the WWC recommendation to DEL that teacher training emphasises the need to challenge gender stereotypes, both in delivery of careers education and in subject teaching, and that it allows for a work-placement for all trainee teachers, including observing workers in non-traditional occupations.

10. Do the proposals adequately address concerns about the alignment of impartial careers information, advice and guidance and the needs of the economy?

On the basis of WSN’s critique of the proposals we find it impossible to believe that a gender-blind policy which does not take cognisance of other relevant Government policies can fulfill these objectives. We believe that in order to address occupational segregation, the gender pay gap and gender discrimination in the labour market generally ‘impartial’ careers advice is not enough. Young people must be fully informed of the potential consequences of their early subject/careers decisions ie. job availability and security, gendered jobs (low pay), opportunities in non-traditional careers, flexibility etc. Enhanced equality in the labour market will have a beneficial impact on the NI economy overall.

In conclusion, we welcome the opportunity to respond to this document. However, we would urge the Department to ensure that the Careers Education, Information, Advice Strategy for Northern Ireland incorporates our suggestions on working towards gender equality in removing barriers, both cultural and structural which have in the past resulted in inequalities experienced by women in the workplace through occupational segregation both horizontal and vertical. The gender-blind consultation document should be amended in the interests of furthering gender equality in the labour market and economic rationality.

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WSN Members

Full Members

Ardoyne Women's Group
ATLAS
Al Nisa Women's Group
Ballybeen Women's Centre
Ballymurphy Women's Group
Belfast Travellers Support Group
Carrickfergus Women's Forum
Carew II & Newtownards Road Women's Group
Clan Mor Women's Group
Derry Women's Centre
Falls Women's Centre
First Steps Women's Group
Footprints Women's Centre
Foyle Women's Information Network
Greenway Women's Group
Lenadoon Women's Group
Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative
Lesbian Line
Ligoneil Family Centre
Markets Women's Group
Newry and Mourne Women
NIWEP (NI Women's European Platform)
Older Women's Network
Rasharkin Women's Group
Shankill Women's Centre
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Associate members

Ballymena Community Forum
East Belfast Community Education Centre & Walkway Women's Group
Newtownabbey Community Voice
Parenting Forum NI
WEA (Worker's Educational Association)