

## A Response to: Draft Gender –Specific Standards for Working with Women Prisoners.

Issued by: Northern Ireland Prison Service

November 2009

## Introduction

- 1.1. The Women's Support Network (WSN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation response issued by the Northern Ireland Prison Service on Draft Gender-Specific Standards for working with Women Prisoners.
- 1.2. The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an infrastructural umbrella organisation, which provides support services to, and represents, 56 community based Women's Centres, women's groups and projects, and women's infrastructure groups and 14 associated members across Northern Ireland (see Appendix 1).
- 1.3. Our members provide a wide range of women-centred front line services across Northern Ireland, including:
  - Specialist Advice
  - Childcare and Family Support
  - Counselling, Support and Advocacy
  - Complementary Therapies
  - Training & Education
  - Health & Wellbeing Programmes
  - Personal Development & Employment Support
  - Volunteering, Leadership & Empowerment
- 1.4. 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. WSN provides an accessible, feminist, relevant and high quality support service and resource for its member groups. The Network is also an important information resource on issues relevant to community based women's organisations and for other infrastructure groups, nationally and internationally.
- 1.5. Over the past 30+ years, the community based women's sector has developed a range of childcare, support, advice, and education & training services in response to the needs they identified at a grass roots level. Women's groups continue to meet the particular needs of

women and their children living in areas considered to be some of most affected by the conflict, and recognised as some of the most disadvantaged areas across Northern Ireland today.

- 1.6. Network members are actively engaged with their local communities, cross-community initiatives and regional structures throughout Northern Ireland.
- 1.7. WSN believes that adopting a women's centred approach can contribute to a reduction in reoffending behaviour. As a result, WSN is currently involved in the development of a six month pilot project in partnership with the Probation Board Northern Ireland (PBNI) and NIACRO. This project is designed to provide women's Centre staff, probation officers and NIACRO staff capacity building training to enable staff and volunteers to work effectively with women who offend and to ensure their local communities can offer support to women offenders. The aim of this pilot is to develop a model for work within the community and to link with the new services at the Probation Board's newly formed INSPIRE centre.
- 1.8. WSN is also a member of the Women's Centre Reference Group which provides a forum for partners in the pilot project to discuss policy and operational issues. The group meets two/three times a year and progress of the working group will be reported to the NIO Minister through the Chair of the group.

## **Comments**

- 2.1 WSN welcomes the publication of the Draft Gender-Specific Standards for working with women prisoners. However we would like to have seen reference to international human rights standards relevant to women prisoners which we believe would enhance their effectiveness. The relevant human rights provisions include: the European Convention of Human Rights, Article 3 (freedom from torture, inhuman and degrading treatment) and Article 8 (the right to private and family life); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 10 (3) (treatment of prisoners with the aim of reformation and social rehabilitation) ; the International Covenant on Economic, Social

and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) Article 11 (the right to an adequate standard of living), Article 12 (the Right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health) and Article 13 (the right of everyone to education); the Convention of Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Article 6 (to suppress all forms of trafficking women and exploitation of prostitution of women), Article 10 (to ensure equal rights in the field of education), Article 12 (to ensure equal access to healthcare including family planning) and Article 13 (to ensure equal access to other areas of economic and social life including family benefits, recreational activities and sport); and finally, the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

- 2.2 WSN welcomes the acknowledgement on pg 15 of the document that women must be given help and support to resolve issues regarding children and families, accommodation, benefit, debt and employment. However the document stops short of outlining how this support should be given. WSN recommends that the document outlines how Northern Ireland Prison Service will ensure that this help and support will be given.
- 2.3 WSN also recommends that Northern Ireland Prison Service liaises with organisations in the Women's Sector to discuss how best this support should be given.
- 2.4 WSN welcomes the Prison Service's view that training opportunities provided in prison should not be restricted to those traditionally associated with women. WSN recommends that Northern Ireland Prison Service works in partnership with organisations such as Womens Tec to provide non traditional training for women.
- 2.5 WSN agrees with the Northern Ireland Prison Service that women must be able to access relevant support and services provided by women's centres and projects in the community. We recommend that Northern Ireland Prison Service liaises with the Women's Sector to review the relevant support and services available and to develop appropriate referral mechanisms to women's centres and projects to ensure women receive relevant support and services.

2.6 The consultation document states that there is only one women's prison in Northern Ireland and therefore young offenders are required to share accommodation with the adult population. WSN would therefore draw attention to Article 10 (3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which states that "juvenile offenders shall be segregated from adults and be accorded treatment appropriate to their age and legal status." The United Kingdom government has ratified this treaty and therefore has international obligations to comply with its provisions. WSN would recommend that Northern Ireland Prison Service works with appropriate agencies to review current accommodation for young female offenders with a view to putting new arrangements appropriate to their age and needs.

### **Conclusion**

WSN welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document. Whilst welcoming these draft standards, we have offered some constructive recommendations as to how it could be improved. We are happy to further discuss this response if required.

### **For further Information, contact:**

Fiona O'Connell- Policy and Research Co-ordinator

Tel: 028 90236923

Email: [policy@wsn.org.uk](mailto:policy@wsn.org.uk)

## Recommendations

1. Reference should be made in the Draft Gender Specific Standards for working with Women prisoners to relevant international human rights standards.
2. The document should outline how Northern Ireland Prison service will work to ensure that help and support is given to women to resolve issues regarding children and families, accommodation, benefits, debt and employment.
3. Northern Ireland Prison Service should liaise with the Women's Sector to discuss how best this help and support should be provided.
4. Northern Ireland Prison Service should work in partnership with organisations such as WomensTec to provide and promote training for women in non traditional trades.
5. Northern Ireland Prison Service should liaise with the Women's Sector to review support and services available in women's centres and develop appropriate referral mechanisms to ensure women receive relevant support and services.
6. Northern Ireland Prison Service should work with appropriate agencies to review current accommodation for young female offenders with a view to putting new arrangements appropriate to their age and needs.

	<u>Member Group</u>
1	All Ireland Mother's Union
2	An Munia Tober (Travellers)
3	Antrim & Ballymena Women's Aid
4	Ardmonagh Women's Group
5	Ardoyne Women's Group
6	ATLAS Women's Centre
7	Al Nisa Women's Group
8	Ballybeen Women's Centre
9	Ballymurphy Women's Group
10	Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid
11	Belvoir Women's Improvement Group
12	Carrickfergus Women's Forum
13	Carew II
14	Causeway Women's Aid
15	Chrysalis Women's Centre
16	Clan Mor Women's Group (Sure Start)
17	Derry Well Woman
18	Derry Women's Centre
19	Falls Women's Centre
20	First Steps Women's Group
21	Footprints Women's Centre
22	Foyle Women's Aid
23	Foyle Women's Information Network
24	Granaghant District Women's Group
25	Greenway Women's Centre
26	Kilcooley Women's Centre
27	Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative
28	Lesbian Line
29	Lenadoon Women's Group
30	Ligoneil Family Centre
31	Link Women's Group
32	Manor Women's Group
33	Markets Women's Group
34	NI Women's Aid Federation
35	NI Women's European Platform
36	Manor Women's Group
37	Newry & Mourne Women
38	Newtownabbey Women's Group
39	Older Women's Network NI
40	Omagh Women's Aid
41	Rape Crisis Centre
42	Rasharkin Women's Group
43	Shankill Women's Centre
44	Strabane & Lifford Women's Centre
45	Strathfoyle Women's Centre
46	The Learning Lodge
47	Voices Women's Group
48	Waterside Women's Centre
49	Windsor Women's Centre
50	Women Connect Project
51	Women into Politics
52	Women's Information Group
53	Women's News
54	Women's TEC
55	Women 2 Gather
56	Women's Resource & Development Agency

	<b><u>Associate Members</u></b>
	Ballymena Community Forum
	CiNI
	Community Relations Forum
	East Belfast Community Partnership
	Employers for Childcare
	HIV Centre (Women's Support Group)
	Mencap
	National Women's Council of Ireland
	Playboard
	RNIB (Women's Group)
	Good Morning Newtownabbey
	Monkstown Community Association
	WAVE Trauma Centre
	WEA
	Parents Advice Centre
	Templemore Community Action Group