POSITION PAPER
ON THE PROPOSED INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE WOMEN'S SECTOR
July 2005

Section 1   INTRODUCTION

1.0   Background

The women's sector in Northern Ireland has grown considerably over the past fifteen years and though this sector has its roots going back into the mid 70's, survey data suggests that over 70% of all women's groups came into existence during the 1990's. The current infrastructure, comprising regional support organisations, networks, women's centres, local and single issue groups have made a valuable contribution to promoting equality, peace-building, social and economic inclusion, social justice issues and the development of the voluntary sector and volunteering.

The current infrastructure has developed in an organic way with a great reliance on short-term funding. Built on this legacy and in the absence of a coherent approach, the issue of sustainability has inevitably focused on funding. Over the past 5-6 years there has never been the time or conditions for the sector to move from a 'survival' ethos to one based on consolidation, mainstreaming and shared responsibility for sustainability (NIVT, 2001).

It is timely, therefore for the Department of Social Development (DSD) to request a paper on the proposed infrastructure of the women's sector.

1.1   Definition of the Women's Sector

It is useful to first of all define what we mean by the women's sector. This has presented a number of challenges for researchers (Taillon, 1992; NIVT, 2001). For the purposes of this paper the definition adopted has been that women's organisations are those which are 1) women led – that is whose management or decision making structures are comprised of women and 2) exist solely or primarily to benefit women through the activities or services which they provide.

There is also an issue over the distinction between the longer established women's organisations – some of which have connections (or perceived connections) with particular religions, and the more recently established women's groups and organisations. The former groups are sometimes referred to as 'traditionalist' and the later as 'activist' and, whilst in the past there was little contact, there is now more contact and in some instances informal links are being forged (NIVT, 2001). This paper will concentrate on the 'activist' sector.

The 'activist' women's organisations are more likely to provide services that are resourced through public funding. These organisations have a focus that involves activism and promoting social change; has a feminist ethos with female leadership; an agenda that promotes equality, justice and inclusion and perceives itself as part of a global movement (Quiery, 2005).

2.0   Profile and Current Infrastructure

The women's sector was mapped through the first major study of women's groups across Northern Ireland in 1999-2000. This research was managed by the Community Foundation for

Northern Ireland (formerly NIVT) with funding from Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and the National Lottery Charities Board and carried out over an eighteen month research period by IRS and Ruth Taillon.

This research looked at three broad areas – to map the existing infrastructure and resources available to the women's sector; assess the impact of the range of activities undertaken by women's groups and to draw conclusions on the priorities for the future.

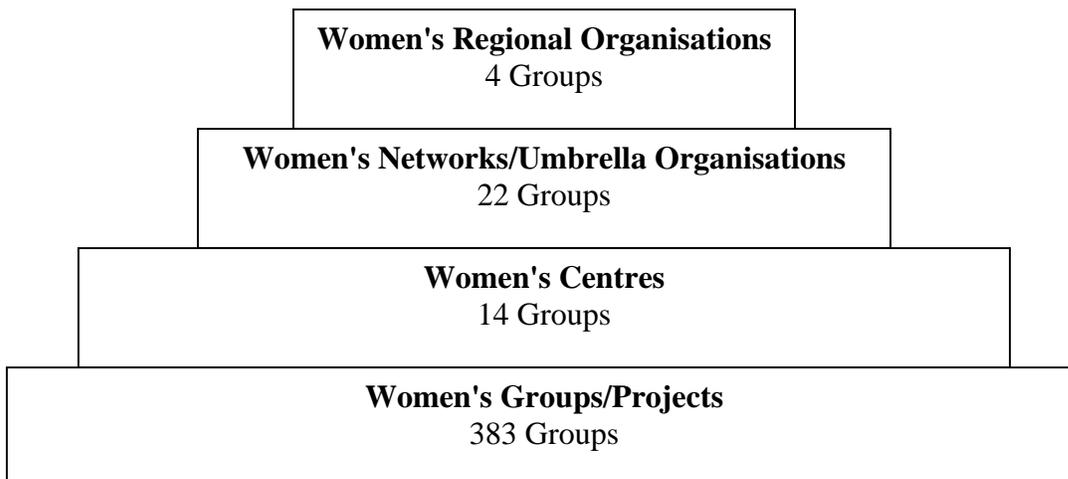Specifically the mapping of the sector would try to define:
- The size of the women's sector
- Key characteristics of the women's sector; and
- Financial overview of the women's sector

The profile of the women's sector identified a number of key indicators such as – the number of groups; rate of growth of women's groups, the location of women's groups (Appendix 1), number of members, numbers of staff, income of women's groups, type of funding for women's groups, funding ratios, prioritisation of activities, mapping the location of women's groups against deprivation indicators (Appendix 2) and number of staff employed by women's groups.

This mapping presented a number of challenges as no comprehensive overview had been conducted. There was a wide spread problem relating to the availability of reliable data from both funders and records held by women's groups. The researchers needed to draw on an extensive range of sources, primary and secondary, in order to meet the research brief.

2.1 INFRASTRUCTURE

Given the information available at the time (NIVT, 2001) the table below represents the infrastructure.

| **Women's Regional Organisations** 4 Groups |
| **Women's Networks/Umbrella Organisations** 22 Groups |
| **Women's Centres** 14 Groups |
| **Women's Groups/Projects** 383 Groups |

However this model has a number of caveats, it was important to agree a working definition for 'activist' groups, definition of women's regional organisations, network/umbrella groups, women's centres, women's projects and locally based women's groups. Research findings revealed a number of issues, for example the size of the sector was not static; there was a tendency for some groups to describe themselves as network/umbrella when it was doubtful if the representation was wider, and the difference between a women's project and a locally based

women's group was not always clear. There was a lack of leadership, sector co-ordination and planned development.

2.2   CHARACTERISTICS OF SECTOR

o Membership is estimated at 6,000 though many times this number use the facilities and services
o The vast majority of 'activist' organisations - 90% - are locally based groups
o 68% of groups are based in deprived areas and two thirds of these wards are in the top 20% of most deprived wards in NI
o 72% of members are in the 26-60 age group, 13% 16-25 and 15% over 60yrs
o Over 25% stated minority ethnic women were participants/beneficiaries
o 63% described services/activities as 'supporting local women'
o 70% of funding is for revenue costs-a significant percentage for childcare
o Estimated that 377 staff (56% full-time) employed ranging from development work, childcare/youth work, training, administration and finance
o There is a concentration of women's organisations in Belfast City Council area (35% of all groups) – partially due to the location of Headquarter organisations
o There is a disproportional low level of development in parts of counties Down and Antrim

2.3   FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

o The estimated annual income of the women's sector, based on 1989/1999 figures was approx £9.5 million. This represents 2% of the total income of the voluntary sector (NICVA,1998 State of the Sector)
o Over half of women's organisations are estimated to have an income between £1,000 and £10,000
o 40% had less than 3mths reserves of funding and restricted and unrestricted funding ratios were poor
o 90% were reliant on grants/EU/Public sector funding
o Many of the larger women's organisations rely on a complex funding mixes with up to fifteen different funders involved.
o The Peace Programme IFB's were the largest funders (at £3.1 million)
o A number of discrete studies seeking to examine the impact of women's groups posed questions about the level of funding for women's organisations (Taillon, 1992) and later noting the funding shortfall for women's centres in greater Belfast (WSN, 1999) A series of conference reports highlighted concerns for the sustainability of the women's sector (TWN and NIVT, 1999; WRDA Future Search 1999). Key recommendations included the need for a clear channel of mainstream funding from government that can resource the core costs of the work of women's groups.

3.0 VOLUNTARY SECTOR INFRASTRUCTURE

3.1 Definition of Infrastructure

The Task Force has defined the infrastructure as – *"voluntary and community organisations whose primary purpose is the provision of infrastructure functions (support and development, co-ordination, representation and promotion) to frontline organisations."* (Change Up, 2004)
A more comprehensive definition has been outlined by Compass/OPM, 2004 to be *"the physical facilities, structures, systems, relationships, people, knowledge and skills that exist to support and develop, co-ordinate, represent or promote front line organisations and thus enable them to deliver their missions more effectively."* This definition makes a distinction between infrastructure *functions* and *organisations* that provide more generalist infrastructure support.

Two further types of infrastructure are described in the Task Force report:
1. <u>Specialist/Thematic Organisations</u> – these provide support to organisations working with specific communities or client groups
2. <u>Generic Organisations</u> – these provide support to all voluntary and community organisations in a particular geographic area

Infrastructure groups were differentiated as either generic or sectoral organisations and mapped at three geographic levels - regional, sub-regional and local.

3.2 Purpose

Developing infrastructure can be viewed as an aspect of capacity building to ensure that the community and voluntary sector has the skills, knowledge, structures and resources to realise its full potential. Infrastructure bodies enable voluntary and community organisations to operate effectively in the interests of the communities, both geographic and of specialist interest, which it exists to serve.

The Joint Government/Voluntary and Community Sector Forum in their submission to the Infrastructure Working Group offered a useful explanation as a supplement to the definition on infrastructure;

> *"Community infrastructure allows new work and new organisations to develop, supports and resources those already there, and facilitates networking which encourages sharing. Good infrastructure builds social capitol, reinforcing networks and developing a resource that is not depleted but strengthened by use. The sectoral infrastructure within the voluntary and community sector allows for an overall strategic view to be developed."* (Knox,C, 2003)

Infrastructure bodies can also provide the mechanism through which Government can discharge its responsibilities in relation to the Compact (DHSS, 1998).

3.3 Role

The roles of voluntary infrastructure organisations were defined by the working group as:

Voice – providing a voice for their membership/constituency group for government, funders and others through representation, campaigning, advocacy/policy work.

Development – providing capacity building support to meet existing needs and identify unmet support needs. Needs may be met directly or by working with others.

Best practice and Advice – promoting and supporting best practice and providing advice on issues of key concern.

Interface – providing access to their membership/constituency for other agencies or individuals including government, partnerships and researchers (and visa versa).

Co-ordination and Networking – both horizontally and vertically between member/constituent organisations and with other organisations performing complimentary roles.

Brokering – pro-actively identifying opportunities for organisations to work together, either across the voluntary sector, or voluntary organisations working with government.

3.4 Principles/Functions and Costs of Infrastructure Organisations

The Task Force (NI) has outlined the Principles and Functions of Infrastructure Organisations along with typical costs for infrastructure organisations (Appendix 3)

3.5 Women's Sector Infrastructure

- Current infrastructure developed in an ad hoc way resulting in some parts of the sector being well developed though overall coverage, geographically and issue based is variable in quality.
- Despite having demonstrated the valuable contribution it makes to achieving policy objectives and delivering services, the women's sector is facing a crisis in confidence, in strategy, in leadership cohesion and in policy. The implications are that the sector feels undervalued, under resourced, under threat and fragmented (CFNI, 2004). This is despite a number of organisations existing for over 20 years.
- There are significant gaps in networks e.g. counties Antrim and Down. There are also specialist projects such as Well Women, Women's News and Women into Politics that work on cross cutting issues and should be wider accessed by the women's sector.
- Women's organisations have proved powerful agents for social change (WRC, 2003) and there is further scope for collaborative working between existing organisations and groups. Women's groups often work at grass roots levels with the most marginalised people in the community and voluntary sector. Women's centres, a number of which are in existence for 15-20 yrs, are in reality local infrastructure organisations offering a wide range of education, advice, childcare and support services to women and families in the area.
- Women's groups/organisations have played a vital role in fostering community engagement and renewal by providing opportunities for people to articulate their views, shape the development of local services and participate in community life, thereby helping to combat social isolation, build skills and confidence.

- Strategic engagement between women's organisations and policy makers is required to plan the future of the women's sector and to manage aspects of its development. Both funders and the women's sector are caught in a 'hand to mouth' cycle of short-term support (NIVT, 2001).
- Overall there is a need for a strategic approach that considers the implications of the type and duration of funding and accounts for short-term needs set within a developmental context. To enable Government and other agencies to see the women's sector as strategic partners, there is a need for women's organisations to appraise their approach to the delivery of services as this will become increasingly important e.g. the Best Value initiative.
- It is possible to identify the contribution the women's sector has made towards addressing gender equality, poverty and disadvantage, improving community relations/peace building, tackling causes of ill health/reducing health inequalities and raising skills and qualifications. However the women's sector must be involved in discussion with government (OFMDFM) around the prioritisation of areas/issues for targeted support.
- Government support for infrastructure needs to be enhanced and brought together in a cross cutting strategy for it has been left to a small number of government departments 'to carry' the responsibility for funding, policy, monitoring and the evaluation of the sector.

3.6   Current Strategic Planning Meetings

- Despite dealing with the funding crisis the sector has been congratulated by Government on its strong lobbying campaign.
- In April and May 2005 representatives from 36 women's groups/organisations came together, in response to recent policy initiatives and to the current funding crisis, and to address common issues of concern. Following these meetings a regional infrastructure was established consisting of three sub-regional advisory groups representing the interests of women in the North West, Rural Women and the Greater Belfast Area.
- The women's sector is keen to work co-operatively with each other and more strategically with the statutory sector. However the sector is concerned not to compromise its ethos and values and to maintain its independence of religious and political groups.
- The sector is concerned that the value of its work is recognised through the provision of adequate resources to continue and develop the work, particularly in relation to an adequate infrastructure (Quiery, 2005). However infrastructure should not and cannot be seen in isolation.
- The sector acknowledges the need for collective leadership and a more structured, co-ordinated and cohesive network. The proposed infrastructure should be inclusive of both urban and rural concerns and should consider standardisation of governance for women's organisations. The emerging model needs to identify collaborative ways of relating and should be non hierarchical and inclusive.

3.7 Proposed Infrastructure

There is a recognised need for a more cohesive structure for the women's sector in order to:

- make strategic sense of existing structures,
- enable government to become involved in more formal partnerships with the sector and mainstream some activities
- provide strategic engagement between women's organisations and policy makers

Many frontline women's organisations and groups have worked hard to build their own capacity, physical facilities, skills development, partnership working etc. However they require support, development, co-ordination and representation from other key stake holders at a local, sub regional and regional level.

Similarly Umbrella/Network organisations have strived to represent organisations and members at Voluntary and Community sector forums and to work strategically to support and develop their geographical area or issue group. However there were often blurred lines in communication and accountability.

The four regional organisations as identified by the NIVT research (2001) provided geographical cover for Northern Ireland concentrating on their own specialisms though lacked the resources and remit to meet or co-ordinate policy or to provide the interface between government policy formulation and frontline delivery.

There is a need therefore to propose a new infrastructure that is effective and meets the needs of the women's sector. It is recognised that the women's sector infrastructure is specialised/thematic in nature. (Appendix 4)

Frontline Women's Organisations - organisations that work directly with women in a local neighbourhood providing services such as informal education, support, advice, regular meeting opportunities and childcare. These may be women's groups and/or women's centres and will be based in both urban and rural areas.

Sub-regional Women's Organisations – organisations that support and develop local women's groups/centres, ensuring that the voice of women is fed into other sub-regional structures and engages with government structures. These organisations will collaborate with the regional organisations where appropriate.

Regional Organisations – the role of the regional organisation will be to work alongside, and collaborate with the sub-regional organisations and co-ordinate cross sectoral responses to common issues. They feed into the generic infrastructure.

Specialist Hubs – each 'hub' has a different focus though common function. They gather and develop expertise to strengthen support in a particular area and develop tools to facilitate good practise where appropriate. They identify gaps in provision and work to ensure these are filled, and provide a gateway to support their specialism.

There is a place for both the mainstreaming of equality issues as well as having separate organisations that focus on equality issues. Women comprise over half the population and services to women should be seen at the heart of every policy and programme of support.

4.0   INVESTING IN THE VOLUNTARY COMMUNITY SECTOR

4.1   Treasury Developments

The treasury have spent considerable time in responding to the recommendations of the Cross Cutting Review. They have restated Governments commitment to addressing both the needs of funders through providing a guide for funders (Guidance to Funders – improving funding for voluntary and community organisations – A response to Recommendations 19 and 20 of the Cross Cutting Review). The support needs of the voluntary and community sector have been recognised as crucial, and ChangeUp is the capacity building and infrastructure framework for the sector.

The foreword to the ChangeUp framework document stated that *"Sustainability can only be guaranteed if other funders ensure that their investment takes account of the capacity needs of frontline organisations and funds the infrastructure that supports them. The costs of infrastructure support should also be included in contracts and grants payments to frontline organisations."* (ChangeUp, 2004)

In England the Home Office has set aside an £80 million fund for catalysing improvement and reconfiguration in infrastructure support over the next two years.

4.2   Types of Funding

Within the funding guide the Treasury indicates that public funding can be used in three distinct ways:
- o Strategic Funding – this is given to well-established organisations recognised to be of strategic importance and whose continued existence and activities are considered to be beneficial to the government.
- o Development Funding – for organisations are awarded seed-corn money to support their start up costs or enable them to expand
- o Project Funding – where grants are used to finance a specific project or outcome

4.3   Forms of Funding

The Treasury outlines three forms of funding for the voluntary and community sector:
- o Contract – where the funding body wishes to procure particular goods, works or services and the voluntary/community organisation will provide them
- o Grants – The funding body offers a grant in order to provide such goods, work or services for which the grant is paid
- o Grant-in-Aid – this can be paid by a funding body to finance all or some of the activities of another body.

In Northern Ireland the Task Force has called for a Modernisation Fund valued at £5 million, delivered over the next three years, to enhance the capacity of the voluntary and community sector to deliver public services. The women's sector could apply to this fund to enable them to restructure.

4.4 Proposed Costs for Resourcing Infrastructure of Women's Sector

Regional Organisation
- o Staffing structure
    - – Director
    - - Policy/research worker
    - - Development/advocacy worker
    - - Admin/finance
    - - Running/development costs   **Costs approx £180,000**

Sub-regional Organisation
- o Greater Belfast staffing structure
    - - Co-ordinator
    - - Policy/research worker
    - - Outreach/Development worker
    - - Admin/Finance
    - - Running/development costs   **Costs approx £180,000**

- o North West staffing structure
    - - Co-ordinator
    - - Development/advocacy worker
    - - Outreach/support worker
    - - Admin/finance
    - - Running/development costs   **Costs approx £180,000**

- o Rural Women staffing structure (Infrastructure & Development work)
    - - Co-ordinator
    - - 3 Development/advocacy workers
    - - 3 Outreach./support workers
      (staff to be located in central office (e.g. Cookstown) and be housed in appropriate organisations in rural locations)
    - - Admin/finance
    - - Running/development costs   **Costs approx £520,000**

4.5 Funding Sources

It is anticipated that VCU will fund the infrastructure costs for the regional organisation, Greater Belfast and the North West and DARD/DSD will jointly fund the costs of the Rural Women's sub-regional organisation. DSD will also fund core costs for Rural, Greater Belfast and North West, Front Line service provision. Rural women's sector will require additional resources to meet the geographical gaps and policy deficit already identified (NIVT,2001).

Currently the Review Group are looking at the services of the women's centres and have identified that the costs are the responsibility of a number of departments.

DSD has agreed to be the 'lead' department (in response to "Investing Together, the report of the Task Force on resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector) and will lead co-ordination across departments of support to services for women in disadvantaged communities.

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The following principles and functions are proposed by the Task Force for infrastructure organisations within the voluntary and community sector.

Principles

- The sector's infrastructure should be independent, owned by, and accountable to the sector rather than by Government;
- An ideal infrastructure is unlikely to emerge from an imposed structure;
- The sector needs an operating environment which enables organisations to work together to provide a comprehensive web of support for the full gamut of voluntary and community sector activity;
- The sector's infrastructure should address the broad development needs of the sector as a whole and not just the needs of those with an existing or potential interest in the delivery of services;
- The sector's infrastructure should be funded on a sustainable basis and in a way that enables it to deliver a core of consistent, high quality functions;
- Infrastructure organisations should embrace the equality agenda to promote equality of opportunity and good relations in their support and service delivery roles(now mandatory for public authorities under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland act 1998);
- The sector's infrastructure should play a complementary role with Government in addressing social exclusion and developing policies and services that are targeted at tackling social need. They can do this through partnership arrangements or other ways of joint working. A complimentary role should not be seen as a means of displacing public services to the voluntary and community sector;
- Infrastructure organisations will engage in advocacy and campaigning on behalf of their constituent groups and individuals and will seek to challenge and influence Government policies; and
- Infrastructure bodies should promote the principles of good governance within the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland, in particular transparency, accountability, best value, legality and improved management systems (e.g. budgeting, accounting, performance measurement, committee procedures and reporting).

FUNCTIONS OF INFRASTRUCTURE ORGANISATIONS

Core Functions
The following core functions, in no particular order, are proposed as the types of functions, which infrastructure organisations should provide although the list should not be seen as being exhaustive. It is also accepted that a number of voluntary and community sector delivery organisations might undertake some of these functions, although infrastructure bodies would be primarily engaged in these activities:
- Representation and participation on behalf of their membership and sector
- Advice, information (e.g. face to face, mentoring, support for submitting funding applications) and signposting;

- Campaigning and advocacy such as social justice and equality;
- Identify emerging needs and develop co-ordinated responses;
- To co-ordinate the work of local, sub-regional and regional organisations and conjoin local needs with sub-regional and regional provisions;
- Support for the community development process to enable people to contribute to issues that affect their lives and communities in which they lives through active citizenship, empowerment , inclusion, equality, partnership and collective action;
- Contribute to the support, development and strengthening of community infrastructure;
- Increase the skills and knowledge of existing groups and develop and support new groups;
- Identify opportunities and provide a lead in creating co-ordination and joint working;
- Service in areas such as training, consumer rights, consulting and mentoring support;
- Raising awareness and political education (e.g. Bill of Rights, Equality agenda, Targeting Social Need); and
- Provide a forum for voluntary and community organisations to understand, discuss and respond to public policy issues.

Examples of Costs Associated with Infrastructure Organisations

a) Compliance with legislation
- o Insurance
- o Health and Safety
- o Company law
- o Inland revenue
- o SORPs
- o Charity law
- o Employment legislation
- o Pensions
- o Legal costs

b) Capacity Costs e.g.
- o Governance
- o Organisational development
- o Strategic planning
- o ICT
- o Financial systems
- o Training
- o Quality standards
- o Membership/affiliation to infrastructure bodies
- o Best practice e.g. reserves, maternity, paternity and adoptions leave costs, provision for redundancy and salary increases, staff development costs.

c) Service Delivery Costs
- o Representation
- o Advocacy and campaigning
- o Support/capacity building
- o Network events
- o Advice/information/sign posting
- o Policy work and consultation
- o Participation costs – childcare and travel
- o Research
- o Training
- o Maintenance and depreciation

Sub-regional Organisations

- Supports and develops local women's groups centres to take action that brings about social change
- Supports the co-ordination of all women's participative structures, providing a forum for women that is inclusive and works in a strategic and collaborative way
- Ensures the voice of women is fed into all sub-regional community/voluntary bodies
- Feeds into regional and generic infrastructure
- Promotes the concerns of women to local councils, council planning services and other statutory bodies
- Provides information through initiating research/audits that feeds into and affects policy changes to improve women's lives generally and specifically in relation to those living in disadvantaged areas.
- Proactively addresses policy issues in relation to Equality.
- Offers networking/events that inform and build capacity in sector
- Potential to create localised cluster groups and to bring in cross cutting issues in relation to 'specialist hubs'

- Develops and supports local women to take action that brings about social change
- Work to address issues of isolation, low confidence and self esteem through non-formal education, volunteering etc
- Provides services such as childcare, health and will often support/encourage self-help groups e.g. breast feeding, post-natal depression
- Provides an outreach facility for services in the area such as education classes, training courses, employment skills etc.
- Engages with local community and voluntary structures and often act as a catalyse for community development
- Ensures the voice of women is fed into all sub-regional community/voluntary bodies
- Provides relevant information and research in relation to the needs of women
- Works across division-inter and intra community
- Promotes concerns of women to the councils and other statutory bodies working with women

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Regional Organisation

- Feeds into generic infrastructure re mainstreaming of equality issues.
- Supports sub-regional infrastructures for women and co-ordinates cross sectoral responses to common issues
- Promotes and facilitates collaborative working e.g. strategic alliances
- Supports specific issues/types of organisation within its membership e.g. interest groups/specialist hubs
- Provides co-ordination between government policy formation and the sub-regional networks
- Develops relationships on macro level and ensures that the women's sector can engage with other sectors/structures
- Influencing policy and advocacy role
- Provides information, advice and disseminates good practice

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Cross cutting issues e.g. health, decision making, young/older women, gay/lesbian, disability, minority ethnic women feed into regional organisation but may be 'housed' in sub-regional organisations as **'specialist hubs'**. Regional organisations e.g. NIWAF, NIWEP, LASI, feed into sub-regional, regional and generic infrastructure to ensure policy cohesion and information dissemination.