

POSITION PAPER – SUSTAINING THE POLICY ROLE OF THE WOMEN’S SECTOR

1. Introduction – the Policy Context

1.1 Policy formulation is a key function of government, enabling the development of particular courses of action to improve the lives of citizens. However, for policy to be effective, meaningful consultation, including the experiences of those living in our most disadvantaged communities, is essential. Formal consultation, on the model of statutory organisations consulting groups designated under Section 75, forms one important element. The other element of policy making involves ensuring that key policy objectives are understood by those in the most disadvantaged communities while their views and concerns are conveyed to policy makers so that government strategy is formulated on the basis of clearly understood need. Effective and inclusive consultation enhances government understanding of issues and is the key to good policy making.

1.2 Recognition of the relationship between Government and the voluntary and community sector in the delivery of policy objectives was articulated in the *Compact Between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland* (1998).¹ This acknowledged that one role of Government is to ‘Provide for the participation of the voluntary and community sector in the development of public policy’ (3.1), while the role of the Voluntary and Community Sector includes responsibility to ‘Advise Government on issues of concern, drawing on real experience gathered through the work of individual voluntary and community organisations, volunteers and service users’ and to ‘Advocate and campaign to seek change as a response to need. ‘(3.2)

1.3 The *Taskforce Report* (2004)² considering the future resourcing of the voluntary and community sector acknowledged the contribution of the sector to the development of a robust policy environment, despite a scarcity of resources:

There are specific areas of policy and service development where the sector has made a significant impact but its policy development role is not sufficiently developed. In addition, where the funding environment is dominated by short-term programmes, the added value of the sector, particularly with regard to tackling disadvantage, is not fully realised. Examples of areas of work that have been affected in this way include...participation of women in marginalised and disadvantaged communities. (4.8)

1.4 *Positive Steps*, the government response to the Taskforce Report, has acknowledged the important role of the voluntary and community sector in the development and implementation of Government policies³:

Consultation is a key facet of a modern policy making process...Input from the voluntary and community sector, particularly communities of interest, assists the Government to fulfil its statutory duties. (9.8)

¹ *Building Real Partnership: Compact Between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland*, DHSS, 1998.

² *Investing Together, Report of the Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector*, Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector, October 2004, p.49.

³ *Positive Steps: the Government’s Response to Investing Together: Report of the Taskforce on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector*, DSD, March 2005.

2. Review of Public Administration

This review of the future funding for the women's sector takes place at a time of fundamental changes in the political and administrative infrastructure of Northern Ireland.

The proposed reduction in local councils and Education and Library Boards, reorganisation of health bodies and fewer service delivery organisations will impact both on the representation of women's interests in the political sphere and on the future employment of women. In this context, it is important that women's capacity to engage in policy consultation is enhanced and that women, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, are supported in their efforts to participate in all avenues of public life.

3. 'Bottom-up' policy making

The community-based women's sector in Northern Ireland is made up of a diversity of organisations, some of which, for example, women's centres, service a geographical community. Others have a community of interest based on a shared identity, such as ethnicity, age or sexual orientation. Others provide a service to women or campaign on behalf of women, for example on issues such as domestic violence or childcare. There are also infrastructure organisations which support community-based women, as well as working with the wider community and voluntary sector and public bodies on social and economic issues of particular relevance to women. Through the networks and other infrastructure organisations, women from disadvantaged and marginalised communities are able to participate in decision-making processes and influence the policies that affect their lives. The strength of the women's sector lies in its ability to accommodate diversity, including working across communities, working with minority ethnic women, women with disability and with older and younger women. It not only reaches socially excluded and disadvantaged groups which the statutory sector cannot reach, it contributes significantly to the development of more effective decision-making at policy level, as is acknowledged in the Compact, by 'ensuring bottom-up rather than top-down policies and programmes...on the basis of empowerment, inclusion, equity, partnership and collective action'.⁴

4. International Obligations to Support Women in Decision-Making

The United Kingdom is the signatory to a number of international conventions related to women's equality, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted by the 4th United Nations World Conference on Women, and UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which concerns the role played by women in conflict resolution and peace building. All these obligations have at their core the need for women to play an equal role in decision-making in all areas of society. Relevant objectives within these conventions include the following:

4.1 CEDAW (1979)

By accepting CEDAW, States commit themselves to undertake a series of measures to end discrimination against women in all forms. In addition, States commit themselves to positive action to advance the equality of women in decision-making, including:

⁴ *Building Real Partnership: Compact*, 5.3, p.13.

7 (b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government.

4.2 The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)

Paragraph 59 of the Beijing Declaration is an explicit affirmation of the importance of the inclusion of a gender perspective in all policy making:

(59) The success of policies and measures aimed at supporting or strengthening the promotion of gender equality and the improvement of the status of women should be based on the integration of the gender perspective in general policies relating to all spheres of society as well as the implementation of positive measures with adequate institutional and financial support at all levels.

The Beijing Platform for Action set out a broad agenda across twelve Critical Areas of Concern, including the unequal burden of poverty on women; inequalities in access to education and training; inadequacies and unequal access to health care; violence against women. With regards to the inequality between women and men in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels, the Platform for Action contains two important objectives:

Strategic Objective G1

Take measures to ensure women's equal access to full participation in power structures and decision-making.

Strategic Objective G2

Increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.

4.3 UN Resolution 1325 (2000)

The UN Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, calling for the participation of women in peace processes, gender training in peacekeeping operations, the protection of women and girls and respect for their rights. Of great relevance for women in Northern Ireland is the following clause:

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.

5. Departmental Policy Responsibilities and the Women's Sector

Policy formulation is a core function of each government department. It is the concern of the women's sector that all policies are 'gender proofed', with full engagement by women from the most disadvantaged communities in our society. The following discussion of possible synergies between the women's sector and individual departments are indicative of the potential that exists for future policy development if women are supported and resourced to play their full part in decision-making.

5.1 Office of First and Deputy First Minister

OFMDFM is the department with an overall remit for the promotion of equality and human rights. Included within this is responsibility for gender equality, race equality, community relations, and children and young people, all of which have a specific relevance for women. It is the responsibility of the Gender Equality Unit within OFMDFM to develop and implement a

Gender Equality Strategy and to coordinate departmental policy and practices in order to ensure full implementation of the strategy. Other policy initiatives are not specific to any one department but are overarching and inter-departmental in scope. For example, in relation to New TSN and strategies to tackle poverty and social disadvantage, it has been shown that women are more likely than men to be living in poverty.⁵ It is therefore imperative that the specific interests and concerns of women are represented in all anti-poverty policies.

The collaborative approach towards policy consultation recommended by *Positive Steps* was put into practice during the consultation over *Gender Matters*. Extensive and in-depth consultation would not have been possible without additional resources from OFMDFM, enabling consultation sessions to be held in women's centres. This required specialist briefing of community facilitators and payment of facilitators, in addition to travel, childcare and hospitality costs for participants. Significantly, the implementation of this consultation required collaboration between infrastructural organisations: the WRDA supplying facilitators, and the WSN working with its membership to ensure women's centres and women's groups participated in the consultation process. This model of collaboration, with departmental resourcing, could be duplicated for other over-arching strategies that had particular relevance for women. However, this could only be achieved if infrastructural organisations have policy workers in place to be able to identify emerging needs, to brief facilitators and to develop coordinated responses on the lines suggested by the Taskforce. This collaborative approach would need to be resourced to continue the implementation phase of the Gender Action Plan.

Ensuring compliance with international obligations (including monitoring how Resolution 1325 is being adhered to) is the responsibility of OFMDFM. A pro-active approach to the lack of women in public and political life is required if real change is to occur. The gender imbalance in decision-making structures could be tackled through capacity building work, involving training women in policy issues and through confidence-building measures. This would require resourcing policy and outreach workers in infrastructural and specialist organisations, as well as supporting the training programme of community facilitators.

5.2 Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

The DHSSPS is concerned to develop policies that will improve the health and well being of the population. There are obvious links between this aim and the work being undertaken by women in the most disadvantaged communities.

The consultation document *A Healthier Future* acknowledged the importance of the role of the voluntary and community sector in helping to deliver key sections of the strategy to improve 'the physical and mental health and social well being of the people of Northern Ireland'.⁶ Women welcome this approach and look forward to future collaborative working.

Women's contribution to the welfare of the family and to the development of society must be recognised as an important constituent in any strategy aimed at improving the health of the community. Women's organisations have been active for a number of years in developing partnerships between statutory agencies and disadvantaged women that facilitate greater understanding of key policy issues. For example, the community facilitator programme raises

⁵ P.Hillyard et al. *Bare Necessities: poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland*, , Democratic Dialogue Report 16, October 2003.

⁶ DHSSPS, *A Healthier Future: A Twenty Year Vision for Health and Wellbeing in Northern Ireland, 2005-2025*, Policy Direction 1.

awareness of health issues with women from TSN areas. This has enabled health professionals to improve and extend service provision in screening programmes.

There are resource implications if this strategy is to be effective. Community facilitators have to be well briefed on relevant policy issues so that they can impart information and are in a position to assimilate and disseminate the views of the women with whom they are engaged. The community women's sector should also be represented at all levels of policy and decision-making, in particular developing childcare services and infrastructure and for all health-related issues. The goal is the development of strong relationships between statutory organisations and community-based women so that policy issues of direct relevance to 'hard to reach' groups can be conveyed to statutory organisations in a manner which is immediate and relevant. Such relationships lead to the development of good, robust policies and to the effective implementation of such policies.

5.3 Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

DARD, responsible for agricultural policies and rural development, operates in what the Rural Community Network described in its submission to the Vision Report as a 'largely gender blind' environment. Significantly few women responded to the Vision Report. One who did, commented on the fact that women on the farms were not included within the remit of the report.⁷

Priority policy areas for rural women include: childcare, drop in farm incomes, the changing nature of rural communities, employment of women outside of the family farm, the development of tourism and other alternatives to traditional agriculture and a lack of transport. While the six Rural Women's Networks support the work of rural women's groups and projects in rural areas of greatest social need, they do so in an environment in which few women participate in public life, a factor which contributes substantially to the gender deficit in rural policy areas. A consortium consisting of the six rural women's networks, the WRDA and the RCN, have attracted DARD funding to employ a coordinator to implement the DARD-funded sectoral programme. However, given the geographical area to be covered, and the multiplicity of issues to be addressed, there is a real need for greater support for women in rural areas so that they can engage with the key issues affecting them and make their views known to policy makers. Until this occurs, the needs of women will continued to be omitted from policy consultations and policies will continue to be formulated that ignore half of the population in rural areas.

5.4 Department of Social Development

Women's centres and rural women's networks, based in the heart of disadvantaged communities, represent the interests of women in community and economic development projects. Much of this work is unacknowledged and under-resourced, the costs of participation absorbed by women's centres. They make an enormous contribution to community cohesion, to neighbourhood renewal, to the health and well being of their communities. Women representing women from disadvantaged communities work in partnership with community organisations, providing a women's perspective on important community development issues. Given the lack of women in public life, this involvement goes some way to redressing the gender deficit in public life and in policy making. It is a vitally important contribution. Core support for women's centres will help to provide a firm basis for the continued involvement of centre workers in wider community involvement. In addition, the task of providing policy support on relevant issues is provided by infrastructural organisations and this needs to be recognised and supported.

⁷ DARD, *Vision Report*, Summary of Responses.

5.5 Department of Employment and Learning

The women's sector is a major provider of education classes for women living in disadvantaged areas. Rural women's networks provide their membership with a wide variety of educational courses, meeting the training and recreational needs of women in isolated rural areas as well as towns and villages throughout Northern Ireland. In the years 1995-2000, approximately 8,000 women were enrolled in training and education classes in women's centres in Belfast.⁸ Their location, in the heart of neighbourhood communities, has meant that they have been able to engage with those reluctant to approach FE colleges. The Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission has acknowledged the importance of the work of the 'diverse and vibrant women's sector' in providing opportunities to return to learning. Of crucial importance is the fact that women's community education enables women to 'move on to higher education, jobs, or to participation in voluntary or community organisations.'⁹ Many women have first engaged with education through their local women's centre (helped immeasurably by the provision of on-site childcare), progressing to become active in their centre management committee and in the wider community. Through this route, women who have been failed by the formal education system have been empowered to participate in public life.

As a society emerging from conflict, educational strategies must include initiatives to overcome the legacy of conflict. The International Labour Organisation urges training in post-conflict societies to be more holistic in its approach, 'life skills training is vital in a post-conflict situation, as it addresses skill gaps which impede the economic (re)integration of those affected by the conflict.'¹⁰ This defines the approach of women's community-based education. A strategy of encouraging personal development and empowerment is providing communities seriously damaged by conflict with women who are confident in their understanding of key issues and who want to be active participants as their neighbourhoods undergo reconstruction. While resources for women's education have come from social welfare strategies to address poverty and social exclusion what is required is recognition of the unique role of women's centres in providing the stimulus for women in disadvantaged communities to play their part in overcoming the gender deficit that exists in community life as well as every other area of public life in Northern Ireland.

5.6 Department of Education

A key concern of those working with young women is to improve the participation of girls and young women in society in general. It is evident that young women do not use youth facilities to the same extent as young men, and when they are in attendance, they are often on the periphery of the activity. Research undertaken by YouthAction Northern Ireland has found that the Youth Service has been male oriented, contributing to girls leaving provision as early as thirteen years old.¹¹ Concerned about the increase in teenage pregnancy, rising levels of substance abuse and lack of education and training for girls, women's centres have pioneered work within their communities, tackling the social exclusion of young mothers through education and life skills programmes and also working with girls experiencing a range of personal difficulties that have led to non-attendance at school. Young mothers have been able to avail of childcare provision in the centres, a facility that has done much to encourage participation by those who have felt excluded by society. This work requires more dedicated youth workers so that more young women can be catered for. It is work that will ultimately pay dividends through enabling users to

⁸ Ruth Taillon, *The Social and Economic Impact of Women's Centres in Greater Belfast*, Research Report for the Women's Support Network, Belfast, 2000, p.49.

⁹ Quoted in Maggie Feeley, *Making Good Learning Partnerships*, ECNI and WRDA, April 2002.

¹⁰ Quoted in Michael Potter, *Women, Civil Society and Peacebuilding: paths to peace through the empowerment of women*, Training for Women Network, June, 2004, p.27.

¹¹ <http://www.youthaction.org/genderdevel.html>

re-connect with society, building up confidence and providing guidance on training and employment opportunities.

6. Conclusion

This position paper has considered the relationship between government and the voluntary and community sector in terms of ensuring that the views of women from disadvantaged communities in urban and rural areas are represented in all areas of policy making. For this to be effective, there needs to be engagement between government and the women's sector and there needs to be recognition by government that the under-representation of women in public life is an issue requiring urgent attention. In 2006 the UK government will be required to undergo an examination of its fifth periodic report on the implementation of CEDAW. Government will report on the progress made on legislative, judicial, administrative and other measures adopted to give effect to the provisions of the Convention between 1999-2003, as well as providing evidence of having acted on the concluding comments of the UN CEDAW Committee issued upon consideration of the UK's third and fourth periodic reports in June 1999. The under-representation of women within the UK generally remains a serious issue for the CEDAW examining committee and government departments will be tasked to demonstrate progress in this area. The present review regarding resourcing women's organisations that provide services to disadvantaged communities provides an opportunity to demonstrate that Northern Ireland is working to redress the gender imbalance that exists within our society.