

A Response to the draft –

**'A Gender Equality Strategy for
Northern Ireland
2005 - 2015'**

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Lynn Carvill
Policy & Research Co-ordinator
Women's Support Network
Floor 2
109-113 Royal Avenue
Belfast
BT1 1FF
Email: policy@womenssupportnetwork.org

Introduction

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 (see Appendix 1 for full member listing), 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, feminist, 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.

Whilst welcoming the opportunity to respond to the Draft Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland, we wish to express our concerns with the timescale attributed to this process. Acknowledging that OFM/DFM are committed to their own timescale within which to publish this strategy, we would contend that a strategy of this nature is of crucial importance to citizens in Northern Ireland and most particularly to women. In light of this, we would have welcomed an adequate amount of time to properly consult with our member organisations, particularly the women's centres and groups based in disadvantaged areas throughout Greater Belfast. Therefore we hope to have a longer timescale to consult with our members regarding the nature and content of government departmental action plans relating to the strategy.

General comments on strategy

The Women's Support Network welcomes the production of this draft strategy. As mentioned in the document, there is a plethora of evidence (locally, nationally and internationally) documenting the systemic and structural discrimination faced by women in societies throughout the world. These structural barriers exist in direct relation to the experiences of men in society. In light of this we believe that overall the strategy is somewhat 'diluted' due to the weight being attached to 'male inequalities' throughout the report. This does not negate the issue of 'male inequalities' but rather that the inequalities faced by women are much greater, more systemic and more institutionalised.

Chapter 1

- 1.1 While the quote from the World Bank detailed on Page 3 may be relevant in terms of the promotion of economic policies, we would suggest that it would be more appropriate if 'gender equality' was viewed in the wider context of the eradication of all discriminations. The World Bank is perceived by many as an institution that perpetuates inequalities on a global scale and therefore may not be the best institution to quote in the context of the promotion of gender equality.
- 1.2 We welcome the point made in 1.3 stipulating that to some degree 'gender inequalities' persist due to the lack of recognition given to men and boys in the sharing of 'family and community responsibilities'. Although this anomaly in society leads to women facing significant inequalities in their lives, it also results in male inequality due to the lack of recognition given to their domestic responsibilities in the public sphere.
- 1.3 In point 1.7 while it is stipulated that action will be prompted to *'identify and address barriers to gender equality'* and *'to bring together into one document what government is doing in Northern Ireland to promote Gender Equality'*, WSN would contend that the identification and examination of barriers to Gender Equality must be prioritised in this strategy. We believe that government have few, if any policies and/or priorities that directly tackle gender inequalities per se in Northern Ireland. While (almost) all of government actions influence the lives of women, they are not formulated or devised employing a gender analysis and therefore do not necessarily have a positive impact in terms of tackling gender inequalities.

Chapter 2

- 2.1 The vision for the strategy as outlined in 2.1 says *'A society in which men and women are respected and valued as individuals, in all our multiple identities, sharing equality of opportunity, rights and responsibilities in all aspects of our lives'*. We agree that terms such as respect, value, sharing and rights could potentially have a beneficial impact on the lives of women. However, we would also contend that 'equality of opportunity' will not necessarily address the systemic discriminations faced by women in Northern Ireland and would suggest that 'equal outcomes' would be more appropriate in this context. This

recognises that not everyone is participating on an equal playing field and structural barriers need to be addressed in order to properly tackle inequalities faced by women.

- 2.2 Under point 2.3, WSN welcome that departments, agencies and other relevant statutory organisations are committed to *'adopting a positive and proactive approach to identifying, understanding and responding to the different needs of men and women...'*. WSN believe that it is crucial to have proactive measures incorporated within the Gender Equality Strategy if government is serious about tackling inequalities.
- 2.3 WSN also welcomes the recognition and value that will be attached to the 'multiple identities' of women (and men). It is important to acknowledge that women do not just identify themselves as women but can be women with a host of other identities e.g. women with dependents, women with disabilities, ethnic minority women etc. Being a woman with a further identity/ies can result in facing more barriers in society.
- 2.4 2.7 details the strategic objectives flowing from the Strategic Goal. We wholeheartedly agree with the need to *'achieve better data collection, analysis and dissemination..'*. This is vital if we are to have a baseline from which to measure improvements.
- 2.41 In relation to the second strategic objective, the Women's Sector has often advocated that paid and unpaid work performed by women should be valued, recognised and rewarded. Major inequalities exist in this area, for example the low remuneration afforded to childcare workers (the vast majority of whom are women) and the fact that the almost all unpaid work is performed by women, as evidenced that most of those categorised as economically inactive in the region are women. As many of the blatant gender inequalities exist in this area (women's paid and unpaid work), we believe that this issue must be fully examined and measured against gender equality indicators in the forthcoming government departmental action plans.
- 2.42 We have some concern regarding the fourth strategic objective *'To achieve gender balance, consistent with merit, on all government-appointed committees, boards and other relevant official bodies'*
The way in which this objective is worded would imply that women are not equally represented on committees, boards and bodies

because they do not have the skills and/or qualifications to be there. WSN would argue that the reason why such committees and boards are not gender balanced are less to do with women's ability and merit and more to do with the structures and processes involved around government appointments. We would therefore ask if 'consistent with merit' could be removed from this objective.

- 2.43 The fifth objective states
'To ensure the active participation of women and men at all levels of civil society, economy, peace building and government'
WSN would argue that this objective could be strengthened by ensuring 'equal' rather than 'active' participation.
- 2.5 We would ask if a further NI strategic objective could be attached to the first key action in Table 2 (Childcare/caring role) – *'to promote the sharing of caring responsibilities'*.
- 2.51 Attached too many of the Key Action Areas there is a strategic objective *'to promote the value of paid and unpaid work'*. It is not clear how this Strategic objective, as it is currently worded, will result in a reduction in inequalities faced by women. Promoting the fact that women have the vast majority of caring responsibilities in society and undertake the vast majority of 'unpaid' work does not address the underlying problems that lead to inequalities. In what way should this work be valued and how will it lead to a reduction in the inequalities experienced by women? We are concerned that this objective could result in the perpetuation of the status quo, rather than trying to resolve this gender inequality and believe that promotion is not enough; reward is needed.
- 2.52 Also attached to a number of Key Action Areas there is a strategic objective 'to reduce violence in society'. This negates the reality of gender based domestic violence (mostly perpetrated by men on women). This dilution of reality is of great concern to the Women's Support Network, particularly in the creation of a Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Chapter 3

- 3.1 WSN welcome the proposal that 'positive action measures' will be employed to deliver this strategy. We particularly welcome that 'positive actions' will be used to tackle the historical discriminations faced by women in relation to men.

- 3.2 Point 3.16 states that *'departments will identify action which contributes to the removal of barriers to equality of opportunity for multiple identities of women ...etc.'* As mentioned earlier in this response, the WSN are concerned with the concept that the goal of 'equality of opportunity' is seen as the panacea in terms of Gender Equality. It is clear from the wealth of research in this area, that equality of opportunity will not necessarily address the historical discriminations faced by women in Northern Ireland, or indeed in the world at large. As long as women experience the reality of being the primary carers in society and are viewed as such and public institutions are structured to suit the lives of men, 'equality of opportunity' will not redress the imbalance of gender inequality. The WSN would argue that departmental action plans could be strengthened if they addressed the root causes of discrimination and promoted 'equality of outcome' for women.
- 3.3 We welcome the proposal that the Gender Equality Strategy will be mainstreamed and incorporated during the whole process of policy development in all of the government functions and that the strategy recognises, to a degree, that departments can bid for resources for specific gender equality initiatives. It is important that government are cognisant that eradicating certain elements of Gender Inequality may cost money.

Conclusion

WSN would contend that overall the proposed Gender Equality Strategy is 'diluted' due to the continual balance given to men's inequalities throughout the document. There is no analysis in this strategy of the structural and systemic inequalities and discriminations faced by women in direct relation to the experiences of men. We are therefore concerned that the full extent of the discrimination and inequality faced by women is not recognised and therefore not addressed. We anticipate that this issue will be redressed as the other aspects of the Strategy are worked through – the drawing up of the gender indicators and baseline measurements, the government departmental action plans and the key strategic areas to be decided, where departments will prioritise their efforts in reducing gender inequality and discrimination.