

A Response to RPA consultation document -

'Review of Public Administration'

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1. Introduction

The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an umbrella organisation for more than 40 community-based women's centres, women's projects and women's infrastructure groups. The WSN aims to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network also aims to strengthen the collective voice for women's groups, to promote and develop networking to enable collective action and to influence policy and decision making processes. The WSN is an important vehicle for taking forward the common agenda of community-based women's organisations, many of which are based in the most disadvantaged areas of the city and which have witnessed the worst effects of the political conflict.

2. Context

The women's sector has played a key role in the development of the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland and in the maintenance of community stability in extremely difficult times. Women's organisations are important contributors to economic development within communities and are at the forefront of endeavours to challenge social exclusion. The achievement of a 'Shared Future' will not be possible without the contribution of women's networks and groups spread across the whole of Northern Ireland, 68% of which operate in areas of urban and rural socio-economic deprivation. We believe this solid record of achievement situates the women's sector as an essential partner in the important task of ensuring that the transition period in the public administration process retains a focus on 'equality, social need, human rights and rural issues', as identified by the review team. We welcome the commitment to partnership working between public, private and voluntary sectors in the proposed new arrangements and we hope that our contribution will provide evidence for the importance of ensuring that a commitment to gender parity in all institutional arrangements will form a core principle in the future administrative structures of Northern Ireland.

As a women's organisation, the WSN is most concerned with the future representation of women in the new structures proposed by the overhaul of the system

of public administration in Northern Ireland. We believe that without the full and equal participation of women these new structures will be neither democratic nor representative of the views of the entire population. The review provides us all with an opportunity to consider what kind of future we wish for ourselves and for our children and in this spirit the WSN offers the following comments.

3. Achieving gender parity

We welcome the disaggregated statistics, particularly as they relate to gender, provided by the RPA document (p.127). These reveal considerable gender inequity within public life, particularly in the upper echelons of bodies, where men hold a higher proportion of senior posts. We note that the RPA believes that the review ‘presents both a challenge and an opportunity to increase the participation of under-represented groups in public life’ (p.129), but we are concerned that no measures are proposed to redress this imbalance. Given the failure of initiatives purported to increase the participation of women, as evidenced by the fact that their numbers have remained static at around 32%, we would argue that the imposition of quotas of 40% female representation on public bodies must be adopted as policy and we would urge the Minister to support this measure. The Irish government has announced this policy with respect to state boards as a best way to increase the ratio of women and we believe that Northern Ireland should follow suit.

◆ A commitment to a minimum representation of 40% of both men and women on all public bodies

For this policy to be effective, the nomination process must be subject to a thorough-going revision. Currently, as Baroness Fritchie has indicated, Northern Ireland has an excess of political nominees. As the majority of nominated councillors are male, the policy severely disadvantages women. We do not believe that this is a satisfactory method of achieving the necessary expertise that will, more than ever, be required in local government. We agree with Baroness Fritchie that ‘building equality and increasing diversity in public appointments’ is vital. For this to be achieved, initiatives to develop capacity must be developed as a matter of urgency. Participants must

include politicians, public sector personnel, and voluntary and community organisations.

Of great concern is the fact that two areas of public life which have seen increased female participation – health and education – are in the forefront of key areas to be reduced. This has huge implications for the future representation of women in decision-making. It will also have specific repercussions with regards to the future employment of women, particularly at senior levels. Our worry is that a contraction in public bodies will lead to a displacement of women from more areas of public life and we would stress again the crucial importance of the review ensuring that transitional arrangements will factor in this possibility so that appropriate measures can be developed to ensure that changes made will provide opportunities rather than further threats to the representation of women.

The example of the Strategic Partnership Boards, often cited as examples of good practice in terms of representation, illustrate the need for some specific measure of positive action. The Belfast board contains four women and twenty four men: one from political parties, one from statutory agencies, one from the community sector, one from trade unions and none from business or agriculture. That is the reality in the absence of any affirmative action.

- ◆ **Capacity building to be targeted equally at men and women and to include participation from political parties, public bodies and voluntary and community organisations**

- ◆ **Positive action to ensure the equal representation of women.**

4. Local government and the voluntary sector

We support the seven council model, accepting the argument that this will minimise the uneven distribution of wealth bases between councils. As a voluntary organisation we have some concerns regarding the future relationship between the sector and local government and agree with NICVA that it is important that the good practice achieved by the sector should be recognised and built on by future partnership

arrangements. The grass-roots expertise of voluntary and community organisations will be invaluable in a number of different ways, particularly in fostering community relations, delivering services, promoting social inclusion and helping to connect people to the larger councils.

As a women's organisation we believe that unless women are reflected in their true proportions within all decision-making structures, then policies that are formulated will not be sensitive to women's specific needs. We believe that unless definite measures are put in place, the current unsatisfactory state of representation of women in local government will lead to policy-making that is even more divorced from the expressed wishes of women.

- ◆ **Partnership arrangements between the voluntary sector and local government to be equality proofed, including gender parity**

5. Political parties

The lack of representation of women, ethnic minorities and the young within local government has been exacerbated by the continued existence of the dual mandate. Women currently make up 22% of councillors and it is possible that this number will be reduced as a result of the reduction in the number of councillors. We urge that the dual mandate is phased out, with a definite time scale in place. While this measure will increase the pool of candidates, it will not ensure greater diversity amongst councillors unless government takes the opportunity to include provisions to increase gender balance. We would urge government to take a positive lead in ensuring that parties offer gender-balanced lists of candidates to the electorate. The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 has not yet been used by any political party in Northern Ireland. There should be greater encouragement by government for them to do so.

- ◆ **Abolition of the dual mandate**
- ◆ **Political parties to be encouraged to stand equal numbers of male and female candidates**

Shadow Councils will provide an opportunity to introduce new codes of ethics with the objective of changing standards of behaviour for both politicians and employees. We recommend that such protocols govern sectarian behaviour as well as sexism, racism and other discriminatory language and action.

◆ **Mandatory codes of ethics for councils**

6. Civic councils

If local government becomes more powerful, it is likely that it will become more appealing to men who are not retired, or who do not already hold several political posts. It might also be more appealing to women, but unless there are specific measures to address their under-representation – for example, a meaningful strategy to encourage political parties to put forward female candidates, to remove barriers to women standing, to ensure that meetings do not always take place at times difficult for those with caring responsibilities - then there will be little change. In this context, the formation of civic councils made up wholly of politicians, to act as a bridge between politicians and policy makers, does not appear to be an advance in the promotion of gender parity.

What women would like to see is some definite statement on the composition of these bodies. We recommend that civic councils reflect the make-up of their geographic areas in terms of gender, community background, age and ethnic background, on the lines of the District Policing Partnership appointments. This would enable fundamental change to take place. It could encourage political parties to consider a possible variety in their candidate selection and to encourage new recruits into their parties.

◆ **Civic councils to reflect the diversity of their communities**

7. Women employed in councils

The lack of women's voices within local government in Northern Ireland is most acute when it comes to those employed within local government structures, with just 14% of women occupying places in the top two management tiers and no women in post as CEO in any district council. The proposed changes to public administration pose a considerable threat to the future employment of women in management positions, but we believe that if the changes are made within a framework of promoting equality and inclusion, then the future of local government could be more welcoming for all those currently within minority positions. We recommend that work-life balance within local government, including the culture of evening meetings is scrutinised and that the institutionalised sexism so prevalent within many departments is countered by mandatory programmes of gender awareness training. There should be capacity building programmes to prepare people for the new responsibilities within local government and under-represented groups should receive specific encouragement to apply.

- ◆ **Positive measures to improve the work/life balance and culture within local government**

- ◆ **Gender Awareness Programmes combined with positive action to increase the employment of under-represented groups**

8. The women's sector and civic participation

The RPA team have stated that amongst the themes that emerged from their research is 'the need to involve communities and people, especially those marginalised or disadvantaged, in decisions that affect services in their area through partnership and strengthened civic leadership.' As we have indicated in our opening comments, this is work that is already being undertaken, often without adequate resources, by the women's sector. For example, Windsor Women's Centre, established in 1990, is involved in a range of partnerships concerned with area regeneration, health, youth and the elderly through work with such organisations as Neighbourhood Area Partnership; Highway to Health; Eastern Childcare Partnership Board; Greater Belfast Community Network; Sure Start; Engage with Age. It also works on a networking basis with probation officers, health visitors, education welfare officers, local primary

schools, etc. The work undertaken by that centre is typical of the work of the other seven centres in the Greater Belfast Area affiliated to the Women's Support Network.

The RPA has indicated that the community and voluntary sector's role 'will develop in scale and importance'. However, without greater resources this will not be possible. Women's organisations are currently in crisis mode, dependent on short-term funding, with child-care funding no longer supported through peace money.

There can only be partnership if there is some kind of equality, both in terms of resources and in terms of representation. The RPA consultation admits the difficulties for women in this area, but offers no way forward. Research with focus groups leads to the conclusion that 'women feel they have much less influence than men on decisions on public services' (p.124) and they also feel that public services do not keep them well informed. The RPA team have proposed that the issues highlighted in the initial consideration of equality, social need, human rights and rural issues will be discussed in further consultation with 'S75 categories'. This, we are told, 'may provide opportunities to...provide an opportunity to address under-represented groups in public life'. (p.117) The WSN wishes to express its disappointment at this weak statement. Surely by now we need something more robust? The RPA does not inspire with confidence in this respect.

- ◆ **Greater resources for women's organisations to facilitate equality in partnership**

9. Young Women

Work with young women is underdeveloped and underfunded. We are concerned that if the Youth Service is to move from education to leisure it will result in a further contraction of opportunities for young women and girls. We recommend that youth services remain the responsibility of education and that more efforts are made to investigate reasons for the low participation rate of young women and to consider measures to increase their involvement.

10. International commitments to promote gender equality

Women want government to live up to its commitments. In terms of under-representation it must implement CEDAW and UN Resolution 1325 so that women can participate on an equal basis in decision-making, including the task of post-conflict reconstruction. CEDAW states that governments 'commit themselves to positive action to advance the equality of women in decision-making' 1325 urges 'Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in...institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict.'. The government's responsibilities are clearly stated in these international commitments. We note that these commitments are not referred to by the RPA team. We believe the RPA should insist upon a requirement to meet these obligations.

Women in Northern Ireland have been consulted in the Gender Equality Strategy, referred to as a supporting policy document within the RPA, and they have given their views very clearly. Greater resources would mean that more women will be empowered to facilitate discussions within their own communities and to disseminate the results of such consultations. More resources would mean that women working on the ground will be freed from the drudgery of continual fund-raising and able to participate more fully in neighbourhood organisations.

Above all else, the WSN calls on those responsible for implementing the review of local government to demonstrate political commitment to achieving gender balance in all future institutions.