



Response to Child Poverty Strategy for NI

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Policy Subgroup
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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) is a partnership of four lead regional women's organisations linking with fourteen frontline women's organisations across Northern Ireland to provide support and services to women living in disadvantaged areas. (See Appendix 1)

1.2 Vision

WCRP's vision is "of communities where women are recognised and valued as equal partners working towards a future based upon shared values of equality, participation and inclusion."

1.3 Mission

WCRP's mission is "To work in partnership to support and strengthen the voice of community based women's organizations."

1.4 Background

The four key lead partners of the Partnership are the **Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)**, **Women's Support Network (WSN)**, **Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)** and **The Women's Centre, Derry**. The fourteen women's organisations are spread across Northern Ireland with seven from the Greater Belfast and Lisburn area, four in the North West and three in Dungannon, Magherafelt and Craigavon. Together the WCRP seeks to develop and strengthen a regional infrastructure which will support community based women's organisations across Northern Ireland.

- To build a strong, effective and inclusive partnership for the benefit of partners and stakeholders;
- To advocate for the sustainability of frontline services for WCRP partners and stakeholders;

- To promoting best practice and quality standards training, education, advice and childcare services in the women's centres;
 - To Influence policy relating to women's lives by identifying and publicising emerging issues facing women in disadvantaged areas.¹
- 1.5 WCRP welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the Child Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland. We agree with the Department's view that "increasing access to opportunities through education, supporting parents into work and providing the necessary support to those most in need" will help to tackle child poverty. WCRP notes that the strategic equality impact assessment recognises that there are gender impacts in terms of child poverty eg. The majority of lone parents are female; however we are concerned the strategy itself is gender neutral. We would draw your attention to the recommendation in a report by the Women's Budget Group² which states "Without recognition and analysis of the links between women's and children's poverty, the Government will struggle to meet its target to eliminate child poverty."
- 1.6 WCRP have considered the 'building blocks' as identified by DWP; we are pleased that such an approach has been taken and welcome the inclusion of detailed priority policy areas. However, we would like to see stronger action and priority on addressing the issue of 'in work' poverty. A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation³ states that in work poverty is at an all time high. We would like to draw attention to the fact that 'in work' poverty is especially high amongst women. Women in Northern Ireland are 59% of those earning less than seven pounds per hour⁴.

¹ <http://www.wcrp.org.uk/mission.php>

² <http://www.wbg.org.uk/documents/WBGWomensandchildrenspoverty.pdf>

³ <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/poverty-social-exclusion-2010-full.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.poverty.org.uk/i51/index.shtml>

- 1.7 Early engagement, particularly with those families from disadvantaged areas is vital to boost confidence and maximise opportunities to improve education and qualifications. WCRP wishes to highlight the important role of community based women's organisations which can make a major contribution in meeting the department's objectives in the eradication of child poverty by enabling women from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter education, training and employment. Research on behalf of Save the Children⁵ has shown that through the education and training of a mother there is an increase in the level of employment, more opportunities for higher wages, and in turn a higher level of attainment in their children. This is seen to be a cost/benefit efficient model for alleviating child poverty.
- 1.8 We welcome the strategic priorities as outlined in 2.12 but would stress the need to remove barriers for parents entering the labour market. A report by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP)⁶ identified lack of appropriate childcare as the single biggest barrier to women's participation in education, training and work, as well as public and political life. The report made a number of recommendations including the development of an integrated childcare strategy for Northern Ireland and increased provision of local, high quality, affordable and flexible childcare.⁷ The Law Centre NI also cited childcare as a barrier to employment stating that "any child poverty strategy needs to make progress in this area if the route to work is to be a meaningful route out of poverty."⁸ The Law

⁵ Liddell, C. and McKeegan, A. (2009) *The Caring Jigsaw: Systems of Childcare and Education in Northern Ireland*. Report written on behalf of Save the Children

⁶ H McLaughlin (2009) *Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation*, Report written on behalf of WCRP, pg 37.

⁷ Ibid, pages 60-61

⁸ Law Centre NI *Working Together To Reduce Child Poverty Seminar: The Child Poverty Act 2010*, May 2010

Centre NI also raised concerns during the Committee stages of the Welfare Reform Bill regarding obligations for lone parents with children aged seven or over to look for employment from 2010, given that there is no childcare strategy or childcare infrastructure in place in NI.⁹

- 1.9 Recent decisions made at Westminster about the benefits system will have serious implications for child poverty in Northern Ireland. A recent publication by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)¹⁰ suggests that the impact of the welfare reform on families with children will be a loss of £5 billion nationally and an increase in child poverty from 2013/14. These changes, along with the spending cuts already in place, will have a disproportionate impact on women and lone parents (90% of whom are female). Pressure on low income families will increase, many of whom are already struggling to manage their household budgets at present, and children will inevitably be affected by this. WCRP welcomes the Department's continued effort to lobby the UK Government to maximise the income of families with children but would like to see details as to how this issue will be addressed.
- 1.10 WCRP would wish to see advice services within women's centres maintained and strengthened so that families have easy access to independent, tailored advice to their needs. For example, Falls Women's Centre and Windsor Women's Centre provide advice to women and their families including family support, child protection, housing and repossession issues, debt and benefits issues.¹¹ We urge the Department to ensure these front line services are resourced appropriately.

⁹ JRCT: *Work, Poverty & Benefit Cycling*, February 2010

¹⁰ IPPR *Universal Credit A White Paper A Response* 2010

¹¹ The Centre Manager at Falls Women's Centre states the service provided is a wraparound service because in addition to the advice service provided, the service is inclusive and based on the needs of women. Provision includes training, education, childcare, personal development and holistic therapy.

- 1.11 Despite the introduction of the Equal Pay Act, women's annual earnings are on average 33% below that of men.¹² Continued action to reduce inequality of income is important in efforts to 'make work pay'. We would welcome the Department's commitment to equal pay, as we see this as an important element in reducing child poverty.
- 1.12 Early intervention work with vulnerable young people on relationships and developing confidence and self esteem before they have children should be prioritised. Women's organisations already make a major contribution in meeting the needs of young women by providing health and wellbeing courses as well as parenting classes. We would wish to see these used as models of good practice and for further continuing resources.
- 1.13 WCRP welcomes that progress will be monitored. Gender disaggregated data would allow for an analysis and evaluation of the links between women's poverty and child poverty. We ask OFMDFM to include these statistics in future reporting mechanisms.
- 1.14 WCRP notes from the strategy that there is little data available on children from minority ethnic groups. Children from minority ethnic groups often access provision in women's centres and frequently do not have English as their first language. Women's centres are fully inclusive and often seek innovative ways to address barriers that women and children face. These children are practically invisible in the strategy but are often the most vulnerable. We urge OFMDFM to include in the strategy these additional barriers faced by minority ethnic women and children.

¹² OFMDFM research 'The Gender Pay Gap in Context: Causes, Consequences and International Perspectives', March 2010

Conclusion

WCRP welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document. Whilst welcoming the development of a child poverty strategy, we have offered some constructive recommendations as to how it could be improved. We particularly wish to highlight the excellent work of the community based women's sector and the positive role they already play in meeting the needs of children and families within disadvantaged areas. We are extremely disappointed that there is a lack of targets, timescales and specific action plans outlined in the strategy. We are perturbed that this document is gender neutral and has not given any insight into the effect of women's poverty on the matter of child poverty. We also have seen little evidence as to how the departments are going to work together and how OFMDFM intend to track progress. Without including any of these within the document, we fail to see how this document would be fit for purpose. We are happy to further discuss this response if required.

Appendix 1:

Lead Organisations:

NI Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)

15 Molesworth Street
Cookstown
BT80 8NX

The Women's Centre, Derry

Beibhinn House
5 Guildhall Street
Derry
BT48 6BB

Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)

6 Mount Charles
Belfast
BT7 1NZ

Women's Support Network (WSN)

109-113 Royal Avenue
Belfast
BT1 1FF

Partners:

Waterside Women's Centre

170 Spencer Road
Waterside
Derry
BT47 6AH

Foyle Women's Information Network

The Junction
8 Bishop Street
Derry
BT48 6PW

The Women's Centre

Beibhinn House
5 Guildhall Street
Derry
BT48 6BB

Strathfoyle Women's Centre

12 Bawnmore Place
Strathfoyle
BT47 6XP

Atlas Women's Centre

81 Sloan Street
Lisburn,
BT27 5AG

Ballybeen Women's Centre

34 Ballybeen Square
Belfast
BT16 2QE

Falls Women's Centre

256 - 258 Falls Road
BELFAST
BT12 6AL

Footprints Women's Centre

84a Colinmill
Poleglass
Dunmurray
BT17 0AR

Greenway Women's Centre

19 Greenway
Cregagh Road
Belfast
BT6 0DT

Windsor Women's Centre

136-144 Broadway
Belfast
BT12 6HY

Shankill Women's Centre

151-157 Shankill Road
Belfast
BT13 1FD

First Steps Women's Centre

21a William Street
Dungannon
Co Tyrone
BT70 1DX

Magherafelt Women's Centre

The Learning Lodge
27-29 Moneymore Road
Magherafelt
BT45 5JE

Chrysalis Women's Centre

520 Burnside
Brownlow, Craigavon
BT65 5DE