



Strengthening Women's Voices in Government

Issued by: Gender Equality Office

June 2011

Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP)

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1.0 Introduction WCRP

1.1 WCRP Vision

“Our 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.”

1.2 WCRP Mission Statement

“To work in partnership to support and strengthen the voice of community based women’s organisations”

1.3 Background

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.

1.4 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 Centres 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.

1.5 There are four aims to the Partnership encouraging collaborative and strategic work on key areas such as influencing policy, identifying needs and gaps in relation to training, education and childcare services, improving communication on good practice and lessons learnt across the sector, sourcing potential sources of funding, etc.

1.6 The Women’s sector has played a key role in building and promoting, social, economic and political change in Northern Ireland. A review

carried out in 2001 highlighted that through its infrastructure, comprising regional support organisations, networks, women's centres and local groups engaged in a diverse range of activities, it has made a valuable contribution to promoting equality, social and economic inclusion, peace-building, and the development of the voluntary sector and volunteering of funding, etc.

1.7 The WCRP tackles women's inequality and disadvantage and supports community development in the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities and works for policy change. The principles of interdependence, co-operation, participation, representation and good practice will be at the heart of the partnership's work.

1.8 The WCRP welcomes the opportunity to comment on the *Strengthening Women's Voices in Government* consultation.

Response to Consultation

Introduction

The WCRP wishes to highlight the unique experiences and challenges facing women in Northern Ireland. While some powers have been devolved; others remain at Whitehall, such as pensions and welfare benefits. WCRP strongly call on the GEO to recognize the unfair treatment of women living in Northern Ireland especially in relation to sexual and reproductive health services. Women trying to access independent advice and support often face intimidation and while termination of pregnancy is lawful, eligibility criteria make access highly restricted, meaning over 1,500 women a year travel to mainland Britain for terminations. Northern Ireland has also fallen behind in equality standards. Women are not offered the same protections as those in England who have greater equality under the Equality Act 2010¹. This Act allows for stronger equal pay provisions and an extended range of positive action measures. United Nations Resolution 1325 remains a stumbling block for the Government and WCRP call on its immediate implementation to ensure the principles held within the Resolution are embedded in any local government reform. Particularly: “*Reaffirming* the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and *stressing* the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution”² and “*Reaffirming also* the need to implement fully international humanitarian and human rights law that protects the rights of women and girls during and after conflicts.”³

¹ http://www.equalities.gov.uk/equality_bill.aspx

² http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf

³ Ibid.

Direct Engagement

WCRP note from section 2.2 of the consultation, that the GEO will ensure 'ministers have direct engagement with individuals and organisations that are affected by their policies.' The WCRP would like further clarification on this issue, particularly how often this will take place, what structures will be put in place for the 'direct' engagement and what resources will be made available for those in Northern Ireland to contribute to this process. WCRP would remind the GEO of their responsibility to ensure there is inclusion and representation from all four nations equally and that all nations should be involved in developing options for direct engagement.

Bringing in Expertise

The WCRP is keen to state that whilst we agree that women's organizations and community groups have extensive expertise; the importance of funding and buying in of this expertise from the sector should be recognized. The community based women's sector within Northern Ireland is facing a crisis in funding, therefore it is important that the sector is fully resourced to ensure the voices of women are heard and fed in to the process. The WCRP seek further clarification on the mechanism that will be put in place for the 'expert' panels. Will there be a tendering process? Will the tender be widely publicised? Can a private business tender for the contract? If a private business wins the contract will there be a social clause in the contract?

IT Platform

The WCRP have serious concerns over the use of an IT platform for engaging women. A digital divide still exists in Northern Ireland, research commissioned by the Digital Inclusion Unit within the Department of Finance & Personnel⁴ highlighted that 43% of the population do not make use of the internet. The paper also highlighted that specific groupings within society felt particularly disconnected from the 'information society'. This included 91% of those aged 65 and over, 70% of people with disabilities and 64% of those in

⁴Digital Inclusion Strategy - http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/digital_inclusion_strategy_2003-2.pdf - 2003

the lower socio-economic groups. We would particularly draw your attention to the fact that in some rural areas in Northern Ireland there is no infrastructure in place for accessing broadband.⁵

Geographical Scope

The WCRP note from Section 3 comments on the separate equality legislation which exists within Northern Ireland. WCRP seek clarification on how issues which effect women in Northern Ireland will be feed in to the cross-departmental working group based in Whitehall. We have particular concerns that the differences in legislation across the UK could lead to a disparity of equality and rights for women as noted previously in relation to the Equality Act 2010.

Conclusion

The WCRP welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document. However, with the abolition of the Women's National Commission after 40 years, we are concerned that the infrastructure of the women's sector has been weakened. WCRP strongly recommends that any new structure encompasses the role played by the WNC and ensures that the views of women from all regions of the UK are heard and communicated effectively to government.

⁵ <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/news-deti-130109-high-speed-broadband>

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