

**A Response to the consultation document -**

**'Draft Priorities and Budget  
2006-2008'**

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## **Contents**

Introduction and Background	Page 3
Priority and Funding Packages – Investment in Skills and Training	Page 4
Priority Funding Packages – Children and Young People	Page 5
Equality, Social Inclusion and Human Rights	Page 7
Conclusion	Page 8
Appendix 1 WSN member groups	Page 10

## **Introduction and Background**

The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an infrastructural umbrella organisation, which provides support 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. The WSN provides an accessible, feminist, relevant and high quality support service and resource for its member groups. The Network is also an important information resource on issues relevant to community-based women's organisations and for other infrastructure groups, nationally and internationally.

The Women's Support Network welcomes this opportunity to respond to this particular consultation process. It is noted in the document that the 'Secretary of State's priorities will have equality impacts for a range of equality categories including, in particular, children and young people, women and people not in employment in disadvantaged communities.' (para. 107). Whilst it is obvious that every aspect of the finalised Priorities and Budget for 2006-2008 will impact on women throughout Northern Ireland, the Women's Support Network wishes to respond to a number of key points outlined in the document.

## Priority Funding Packages - Investment in Training and Skills

The WSN recognises that there is a need to increase the skills base of the working population throughout the region. Community based women's education and training programmes, delivered in areas of social and economic disadvantage, exist to meet this very need. Community based women's education programmes enable women living in disadvantaged communities to ease their way (back) into learning, taking cognisance of the particular needs that they have eg. Childcare, flexibility, transport and a range of learning support mechanisms.

The Department of Employment and Learning have committed to *'tackling economic inactivity in the interests of promoting opportunity for those currently outside the labour market'*. (DEL PSA and proposed budget allocation). The economic activity rate for women of working age (16-59) in Northern Ireland in Spring 2005 was 65%, 13% lower than the male activity rate<sup>1</sup>. Therefore 35% of women of working age are categorised as economically inactive by government i.e., they are outside of the mainstream labour market and/or undertaking unpaid work. It is widely acknowledged that women's contribution to the economy, their unremunerated work at home and their role as carers, is often overlooked and certainly undervalued. While we agree that the problem of 'economic inactivity' should be addressed, we would contend that DEL and other departments must acknowledge the gender inequalities and discriminations faced by women in relation to access to education, training and the mainstream labour market and take appropriate action to address this.

It is in this context that the Women's Support Network welcomes the new funding package to enhance investment in training and skills and would urge government to ensure that it impacts positively on the existing inequalities in the labour market, particularly on women living in disadvantaged areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, "Women in the Labour Force", July 2005

## **Priority Funding Packages – Children and Young People**

The new funding package of £25 million in each year of the proposed Priorities and Budget is welcomed by the Women's Support Network. Reducing child poverty, enhancing educational development and social inclusion through a co-ordinated strategy should have a beneficial impact on the lives of disadvantaged individuals and communities.

If government is serious about enhancing skills, reducing levels of economic inactivity and ensuring that all groups, including women, have equal opportunities in terms of education and training provision and access to the mainstream labour market, it is crucial that co-ordinated action across a number of areas is implemented. For many women the lack of quality, affordable childcare remains an insurmountable barrier in their quest to access education/training and/or work. Many of the Women's Centres based throughout the Greater Belfast area have acknowledged the need to implement holistic strategies when encouraging women from disadvantaged areas to undertake education and training courses and have ensured that such barriers can be overcome through the provision of childcare in their local centres.

The objectives of this funding package will be met through a number of key approaches including 'developing and implementing an integrated framework for service delivery, involving a range of providers, that delivers high quality, cost effective and flexible provision that meets the needs of children and young people and their parents.' (Para 72). We would urge government to ensure that the 'working out' and implementation of the overall co-ordinated strategy recognises the diverse needs of parents, particularly women living in disadvantaged communities.

The Women's Support Network are concerned that while this funding package is to be implemented there is no detail as to how it will be allocated to departments and delivered on the ground. How it will be delivered and the criteria used to allocate these funds are of critical importance to all of those who work in the area of childcare policy and provision. We are therefore disappointed that this detail is not outlined in the 'draft' document.

As a result, we would recommend thorough consideration be given to the delivery and implementation of this strategy for children, young people and their parents with particular emphasis being placed on the vast range of needs of lone parents and women living in disadvantaged communities.

## **Equality, Social Inclusion and Human Rights**

The Women's Support Network are disappointed with the content in this document relating to general equality issues, particularly the dearth of consideration given to the development/implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy. A comprehensive and well-informed Gender Equality Strategy is viewed as a vital policy component in the context of government's stated aim to create a '*cohesive, inclusive and just society*' (overall aim of OFMDFM). This strategy must address the structural inequalities faced by women in Northern Ireland and ensure that these inequalities and discriminations are acknowledged, carefully considered and strategically addressed.

It is clearly outlined in this document that there will be a substantial rise in rates of 19% and Water Charges will be introduced; both taxes to be introduced in 2007. While the increase/introduction of these taxes are explicit in the Draft Priorities and Budget document, details on the processes involved, content and implementation of both the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Strategy and the Northern Ireland Bill of Rights are blatant in their omission. The Women's Support Network believes that the proposed rises in taxation must be balanced with strategic policies such as the anti-poverty strategy and the implementation of a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights that would incorporate socio-economic rights. This would ensure that the particular circumstances/anomalies faced/experienced by the people of Northern Ireland compared with others in the UK (e.g. higher poverty levels, higher social security benefit dependency, lower wage levels etc.) could be considered. These issues have a negative and disproportionate impact on women generally in Northern Ireland, as women are much more likely to be economically inactive, in low paid, part-time work and the vast majority of lone parents are women. We would reiterate that there is a clear imbalance in relation to the above and that this should be rectified in the final document.

## Conclusion

- We welcome the priority funding packages addressing the need for investment in Training and Skills and promoting actions and programmes to enhance the educational development, well-being and social inclusion of children and young people. We are disappointed that there is no detail on how the priority fund for Children and Young People will be allocated and delivered on the ground.
- We would urge government to ensure that a co-ordinated and strategic approach be employed regarding the delivery of these funds, taking cognisance of the structural gender inequalities that exist with regard to women's access to training, education and employment and the barriers they face such as lack of childcare.
- We would urge government to ensure that the work of community based women's education, which has been proven to have a beneficial impact on the lives of women living in disadvantaged areas and indeed on their communities as a whole, be recognised and funded accordingly.
- The WSN are disappointed that there is not more in this document in terms of promoting and progressing the Equality and Human Rights Agenda. We are also disappointed that there is little in terms of the progression of both the Gender Equality and Anti-Poverty Strategies.
- While there are no targets or timetables in relation to the above agendas and strategies, there are clear targets set for the implementation of water charges and rates hikes. The WSN have no doubt that this proposed new taxation will have a negative and disproportionate affect on women living in Northern Ireland. We would therefore urge government to take a more balanced view and ensure

that women are not disproportionately affected and that the aforementioned agendas and strategies are driven with the same rigour as the new/increased taxation agenda.

## **Appendix 1**

### **WSN Member groups**

Al-Nisa Women's Group  
Ardoyne Women's Group  
Ashton Centre  
ATLAS (Lisburn)  
Ballybeen Women's Centre  
Ballymurphy Women's Centre  
Belfast Women's Training Services  
Belfast Travellers Education & Development Group  
Brook (Belfast)  
Citywide Women's Consortium  
Derry Women's Centre  
East Belfast Community Education Centre & Walkway Women's Group  
Falls Women's Centre  
Footprints Women's Centre  
Greenway Women's Centre  
Lenadoon Women's Group  
Lesbian Advocacy Service Initiative  
Northern Ireland Women's European Platform  
Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities  
Parenting Forum NI  
Shankill Women's Centre  
South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP)  
Strabane & Lifford Women's Group  
WEA  
WEFT  
Windsor Women's Centre  
Women's Aid  
Women's Information Group  
Women into Politics  
Women's News  
Women's Resource Development Agency  
Women's Tec