

A submission to the consultation on -

**‘Work and Families – Choice and
Flexibility
Regulations and Policy’
(June 2006)’**

Lynn Carvill
Policy and Research Co-ordinator
Women’s Support Network
Floor 2
109-113, Royal Avenue
Belfast
BT1 1FF
Tel: 02890 236923
E-mail: policy@womenssupportnetwork.org

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 (mostly in the Greater Belfast area), 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.

The Women's Support Network welcomes that choice and flexibility for work and families and carers is to be enhanced. We also welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation process. As a network representing women's centres and host of other women's organisations and groups (mostly based in the Greater Belfast area) we clearly have an interest in policies that could reduce inequalities faced by women in Northern Ireland and in the wider UK.

A number of salient points in relation to the regulations and policy are outlined below:

1. WSN believes that the proposals outlined in this policy have the potential to enhance gender equality, particularly in relation to addressing the gender stereotyping of women's 'caring' role and improving women's opportunities in the labour market.

Notwithstanding the influx of women into the mainstream labour market over the last two decades, the reality remains that having children and women's perceived role of primary care giver, has ensured that they have remained disadvantaged both in financial terms (Unequal Pay) and in terms of their career prospects (although women have surpassed men in terms of educational gain, low-paid and part-time jobs are still dominated by women).

We are therefore delighted that fathers' caring role is to be recognised in line with that already recognised for mothers. We applaud that this policy recognises that 'caring' for children is a parental responsibility and not just a maternal responsibility. However, we believe that cultural change is also needed to ensure that the aims of this policy are truly realised. Employers and society in general will have to examine and change stereotypical attitudes that exist in terms of caring and parental responsibility and how it impacts both in the workplace and in society generally.

2. WSN is pleased that paid maternity leave is to be extended to 9 months. However, we would suggest that the proposed 3 month extension be named 'parental leave' rather than 'maternity leave'. While overall this policy recognises the male role of parent and care giver, we believe that it could be strengthened by recognising that its purpose is to care for a baby and that the title of this extended paid leave should be un-gendered. We believe that this could go some way in encouraging new fathers to avail of their new paid paternity leave rights.

3. While welcoming the overall aim of this policy to improve work-life balance and enhance the recognition of men's parental responsibilities, a major obstacle remains in terms of the low levels of statutory Maternity/Paternity pay. At the moment new mothers are entitled to six months paid statutory maternity leave. At approximately £106 per week many working mothers find they cannot afford to take their full entitlement. This being the case it is likely that low levels of statutory paternity pay will discourage men from taking this entitlement. We would urge DEL and other relevant government departments to examine this issue. Having the responsibility for a new addition to the household is not the best time to simultaneously have a greatly reduced household income and this unfortunately is the reality for many new parents. We would therefore strongly advocate that SMP/SPP should be at a 'liveable' level, at least the level of the National Minimum Wage.
4. We agree that the concept of 'keeping in touch days' is useful, enabling new parents to maintain contact with their employer and easing pressure on employers, particularly those in small organisations. Furthermore we agree that participating in this scheme must remain consensual for both the employee and the employer.
5. WSN is also pleased that the right to request flexible working is to be extended to carers. We would advocate a 'carer' be viewed in the broadest

sense for the purposes of this policy. We believe that this will improve the lives of carers (most of whom are women) in Northern Ireland in relation to the disadvantage they face in the labour market generally. Furthermore, in the interest of enhancing work and family balance, we concur that the right to request flexibility in work be extended to parents of older children.