



## **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 2010<sup>1</sup>. 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”<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.equalities.gov.uk/equality\\_bill.aspx](http://www.equalities.gov.uk/equality_bill.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.un.org/events/res\\_1325e.pdf](http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> 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 & Personnel<sup>4</sup> 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

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<sup>4</sup>Digital Inclusion Strategy - [http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/digital\\_inclusion\\_strategy\\_2003-2.pdf](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.<sup>5</sup>

### **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.

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<sup>5</sup> <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