



Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP)

Response to

A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: Next Steps

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Introduction

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 providing support and services to disadvantaged areas.

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.

Women's Rights

The women's sector has been deeply involved in every step of the process towards a Bill of Rights. We have engaged in consultation with our members and have provided evidence to the NI Human Rights Commission and to the Bill of Rights Forum on the issues we regard as particular to the circumstances of Northern Ireland.

We are deeply disappointed to discover that the women's sector input has not been reflected in the outcome and we ask the question – why have we been ignored? What evidence is there that there should be nothing relating to the disadvantages experienced by women in Northern Ireland in any future Bill of Rights?

In 2009 we produced a substantial research report, *Women living in Disadvantaged Areas: Barriers to Participation* (Helen McLaughlin), which was endorsed by Margaret Ritchie in her capacity as Minister for the Department of Social Development. This makes it very plain that there are deep rooted structural barriers to women's equality. In February 2010 we produced a further research report *Women's Experience of Violence: Mapping Experiences and Responses* (Anne McMurray), the findings of which reveal

significant differences for women in Northern Ireland, not least in the fact that some of the perpetrators of violence come from paramilitary backgrounds. We are enclosing both of these reports as evidence for the necessity of including women's rights within a Bill of Rights.

It is our understanding that a Bill of Rights should take cognisance of international human rights instruments. The Consultation Paper completely ignores The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women. We regard this as deeply worrying.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission was tasked with providing advice to the UK government on the scope of a future Bill of Rights. The report it submitted made it very clear which rights should pertain to the particular issues and problems of Northern Ireland. We believe that this advice should form the baseline for any future Bill, although we would argue that it also should have included the full range of reproductive rights.

The consultation process

The Code of Practice on Formal Consultation states *"Formal consultation should take place at a stage when there is scope to influence the policy outcome."* Does this mean that the NIO will take into consideration the views of those who believe this document to be utterly inadequate? Is this an exercise in genuine consultation?

The Code of Practice also states that *'Consultations should normally last for at least 12 weeks with consideration given to longer timescales where feasible and sensible.'* This consultation period has included the Christmas and New Year period, one of the busiest times for women in the home. This has had a detrimental impact on our ability to engage with the sector. The process should have recognised this.

In addition, as consultation exercises are supposed to be designed to be *"accessible to, and clearly targeted at, those people the exercise is intended to reach"*, we can only

conclude that this has been a deeply flawed process, one which reveals the NIO to have had no serious attempt to develop a meaningful consultation or to have engaged meaningfully with consultees.

We do not believe that this document can form the basis for a future Bill of Rights. We urge the Secretary of State to scrap this document, to return to the advice provided by the NIHRC and to restart the process.