



Written Evidence to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure Inquiry into Participation in Sport and Physical Activity

1. 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) consists of four lead regional and sub regional women's organisations linking with fourteen frontline women's organisations across Northern Ireland. This partnership emerged from the report of the review group on women's organisations providing support and services to disadvantaged areas.

1.4 The four key lead partners of the Partnership are the Women's Resource and Development Agency, Women's Support Network, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network 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 will seek 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 WCRP will tackle women's inequality and disadvantage and support community development in the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities and work for policy change. The principles of inter dependence, co-operation, participation, representation and good practice will be at the heart of the partnership's work.

2. Inquiry into Participation in Sport and Physical Activity

2.1 Women's Centres and Women's Groups have for many years identified, considered and implemented solutions to increase adult women's participation in sport and physical activity and the WCRP would like to share with you the knowledge and evidence they have on what works for women.

2.2 Women often experience different barriers to participation in public and social life than men; including participation in sport and physical activity.

2.3 Women's Learning Partnership Project

The WCRP initiated the *Women's Learning Partnership Project* as a result of the knowledge and experience gained over many years on how women prefer to engage in physical activity. *Women's Learning Partnership Project* (which is currently funded by The Big Lottery under their Live and Learn programme) believes in improving physical and mental health in the target disadvantaged areas. The project aims to improve physical and mental health of women by:

- enabling beneficiaries to make better informed choices relating to their physical health and that of their children/families
- enabling women to gain a better knowledge and understanding of statutory and voluntary support available
- overcoming “social taboos” in relation to mental health
- promoting physical exercise as a way to improve emotional and physical well being.
- addressing the legacy of the conflict and recognising that ‘life skills training is vital in a post-conflict situation’
- supporting socially and economically isolated women to overcome much of the negativity, reverse the feelings of isolation and apathy

2.4 Range of Sport and Physical Activity Provision

The *Women’s Learning Partnership Project* deliberately set out to engage hard to reach women. The views of hard to reach women helped shape the nature of the proposed *Women’s Learning Partnership Project* response and their participation enables them through project monitoring and evaluation to influence the future development of the project.

Currently on offer in the prospectus are such wide ranging sporting and physical activities as:

- Yoga
- Dancercise
- Learning to cycle
- Weight Management
- ‘Golden Girls’ Health Club
- ‘The Mammy Program’
- Aqua aerobics
- Line Dancing
- Introduction to Women’s Health
- Chair based activity and weight management
- Positive Ageing Program

2.5 This brief overview of the type of activity based courses the *Women's Learning Partnership Project* are offering this term clearly indicates that the WCRP are cognisant of the multiplicity of women's lives; older women; mothers; those with mobility issues are all catered for. It is the ethos of Women's Centres to reduce the barriers to women's participation and provide a holistic, supportive environment. The other courses and activities delivered by the Women's Centres such as: Essential Skills; personal Self Confidence and Self-Awareness are ideally placed to recruit those most marginalised and least likely to participate.

2.6 Childcare

Lack of appropriate childcare is identified¹ in recent research as the 'primary barrier' to women's engagement. The Women's Centres delivering the *Women's Learning Partnership Project* provide free on site childcare for those beneficiaries participating in the project (and indeed many other activities and courses offered by the Centres).

2.7 Examples of Uptake

In the first term across the 13 WCRP Women's Centres, we enrolled 256 women in physical activities.

Some examples of uptake of physical activities are:

- Waterside Women's Centre – they enrolled 118 women in September 2009 in courses like yoga, tai chi, learn to swim, gentle aerobics and aqua aerobics. Initial monitoring of the project showed that the women's centre was able to address and tailor their courses to the learners' needs and also the issue of **affordability** (Waterside "had a few women thanking them for running the course as they would not have been able to afford the courses on their own").
- In Footprints Women's Centre they were able to offer a dance class. The beneficiaries said: "It helped me to keep fit, I had a good laugh, it gave me "time for me" and I had a good time"; "The program had a variety of dance

¹ Dr Helen Mc Laughlin, (2009) '*Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation*'

and overall fitness program , a new experience”. In Footprints Women’s Centre, childcare **is important and an essential for running courses.**

- In Greenway Women’s Centre, Yoga and meditation classes are designed to have an impact on both physical and mental health – two sides of the same coin.

2.8 The *Women’s Learning Partnership Project* is ensuring the improvement of physical and mental health for local women in Northern Ireland, by:

- enabling beneficiaries to make better informed choices relating to their physical and/or mental health.
- enabling beneficiaries to address stressful situations and problems which impact negatively on their mental health.
- learning about alternative approaches to physical and mental health.
- offering a safe, confidential environment where women can discuss their mental health issues without being judged.
- encouraging participants to regularly use local leisure facilities.
- enabling women to understand the link between physical and mental health and between low self esteem and poor health
- preventing women from relapsing into negative behaviours and attitudes towards their mental and physical health in the post programme period.

2.9 The Gender Equality Strategy

The ‘Gender Equality Strategy’²recognises that: ‘treating men and women the same – that is being ‘gender neutral’ - is not the solution to eradicating gender inequality’ (p.15) and later: ‘treating men and women the same will not ensure equal outcomes because of the different experiences of women and men and the different economic and social positions occupied by them’ (p27). The strategy commits government to applying Gender Mainstreaming when implementing the Strategy. ‘To effectively tackle gender inequalities we must address the structures and systems which act as the root causes of gender inequality. To do this we

² OFMDFM. *A Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2006-2016*. The Gender Equality Unit. 2006

must mainstream gender concerns into all our policies, programmes, service delivery etc. Using gender analysis to identify where structures, systems and society's stereotypical norms lead to unintentional disadvantage and discrimination on the grounds of gender' (P 26). Gender Mainstreaming 'challenges decision-makers to question the assumption that policies and programmes affect everyone in the same way' (p 27).

2.10 WCRP welcomes the research the Committee have already considered³ which acknowledges that women experience specific barriers when engaging in Sport and Physical Activity. We would ask the Committee to take account of the multiplicity of the roles women have; e.g. an older, disabled women with caring responsibilities. WCRP would urge the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure to take into account the different experiences of women and the barriers they may face when engaging in sport and physical activity.

2.11 Our experience is that women are not reluctant to engage in Sport and Physical Activity when the right environment and conditions are created and every attempt to remove barriers is made.

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³ *Barriers to Sport and Physical Activity*, Aidan Stennett; Research Paper 15 Jan 2010