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**Northern Ireland
Rural Women's Network**

**Northern Ireland
Rural Women's Network (NIRWN's)
Response To**

**Programme for Cohesion,
Sharing and Integration**

OFMDFM

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) is a regional network established to articulate the voices of women in rural areas. It is jointly funded by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department for Social Development (DSD).

1.2 NIRWN has six key objectives:

- Increasing the voice of rural women through giving them a voice at Policy level
- Playing an advocacy and lobbying role on behalf of rural women
- Capacity Building and Group Development for rural women
- Encouraging women in decision-making and providing representation for rural women
- Information and networking opportunities for rural women
- Working within the Women's Centres Regional Partnership to give a voice to rural women's centres

1.3 NIRWN welcomes the opportunity to comment on the OFMDFM 'Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration' consultation document. NIRWN helped facilitate a focus group session for rural women on behalf of the wider women's sector and many of the issues raised at this session are reflected in our response. Our comments in relation to specific issues are set out below.

Response to Consultation

2.0 CONTEXT

2.1 Women and the Conflict

A crucial absence from the document is a consideration of the conflict, which the draft strategy ignores. As one participant in our consultation exercise put it: "We feel the document comes from a false position because it doesn't mention the conflict".

The post-conflict political structures and processes are founded on pre-existing inequalities. This is despite the fact that the Good Friday Agreement expressly recognised "*the right of women to full and equal political participation*"¹ and required the government to "*pursue broad policies for... the advancement of women in public life.*"² This means that much of government policy directed at the post conflict transition ignores or devalues women's needs and contribution.

The documents issued for consultation on the Draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI) perpetuate these inequalities. The Draft Strategy ignores the contribution of women and the women's sector to conflict resolution. None of the 7 case studies in the document refers to women or the women's sector which our focus group participants clearly felt illustrates how absent 51% of the population are from this document.

A new CSI strategy needs to acknowledge the role of women in conflict resolution and peace-building. It must look specifically at examples of good practice in the women's sector and especially outside Belfast.

Thus a redrafted strategy must acknowledge:

- that a long and violent conflict took place and is still in some aspects ongoing;

¹ THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT, Human Rights, at para 1

² THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT Rights, Safeguards And Equality Of Opportunity, at para 1

- the differential impact of the conflict on women and address the needs of women which result;
- that those effects are ongoing – for example in respect of dependency upon alcohol, prescription drugs, mental health problems etc;
- that dependency upon drugs and alcohol also feed into hate-based crimes and a health strategy needs to address that;
- that the conflict was both driven by and impacted upon inequalities in education, housing and employment;

Thus, a new CSI strategy needs to acknowledge the role of women in conflict resolution and peace-building.

2.2 Gender Equality Strategy

The draft strategy ignores the requirements of the government's own Gender Equality Strategy³ and it fails to properly address the requirements of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998⁴. This is partly a result of a skewed approach - an approach that views sharing, cohesion and integration only through the lens of race and community background. In this approach, conflict and violence are regarded as having had no impact upon women and gender equality is considered irrelevant. This is fundamentally wrong: in law, in policy and in practice.

This is a clear breach of government's own stated policy (as well as equality duty). All government departments are required to *"take the gender perspective into account during the whole process of policy development in all of the government functions and in the subsequent implementation, review and evaluation of that policy."* This is a specific requirement of the Gender Equality Strategy (GES), which was developed by the same government department (OFMDFM) which has produced this document, so it is doubly inexcusable that the GES has been ignored when preparing the CSI Draft Strategy.

³ <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/equality/gender-equality.htm>

⁴ www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/PracticalGuidanceEQIA0205.pdf

In addition the GES requires:

- the recognition by policy formers that multiple identities impact significantly upon equality and to take that into account when shaping government policy;
- that the GES integrate with other equality strategies, including those addressing “good relations, poverty [and] social exclusion”.
- that government departments are committed to ensuring that gender stereotypes and sexism do not influence policy formation;
- drafting “specific operational objectives with outcome focussed targets to meet these strategic objectives”.

All these are missing from the CSI proposals. The GES also specifically rejects the idea of a ‘gender neutral’ approach, which the Draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration has clearly adopted.

2.3 UNSCR 1325

The Draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration ignores the under-representation of women in public life and political structures and the requirements of UNSCR1325⁵. The exclusion of women from official policy and structures is a perennial problem, which has in this case been compounded by the remarkable blind spot on the part of those drafting the CSI consultation documents. They appear ignorant or dismissive of the positive role played by women in good relations and conflict resolution in Northern Ireland.

2.4 EQIA

It would appear that no EQIA was carried out on the draft strategy. The document merely refers to the requirement to screen policies for equality before deciding to carry out an EQIA, but avoids stating what the outcome of the screening exercise was on the CSI draft.

⁵ <http://www.peacewomen.org/un/sc/1325.html> UNSCR 1325 emphasises the distinct position of women in conflict and post conflict situations. It calls on member states to act in several areas, including the promotion of women in decision making institutions

It is uncertain that an EQIA has been carried out on the draft strategy. The wording in the draft CSI documents is very unclear. Its implication is that no EQIA has in fact yet been carried out. If this is the case, it is a remarkable omission. NIRWN would like clarification from OFMDFM on whether or not an EQIA was carried out on the Draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration.

2.5 Timing and Format of Consultation

Our focus group participants were very clear in their expression of concern over the timing and format of the consultation. The official consultation process runs from July to Oct with public meetings held the first week in September in a period when most parents are concerned with the return of their children to school or college or their entry into a new one. This suggests that little cognisance was taken of the ability of parents to participate in the meetings. Furthermore, meetings were held in the evening and no childcare facilities were on offer – an example of how *not* to gender-proof a strategy.

The many flaws of the consultation process have been compounded by the exclusion of women as a sectoral group. The purpose of these sectoral meetings is described as giving "*particular sectors the opportunity for more focused discussion on aspects of the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration.*"⁶ Yet the women's sector, which represents more than 50%⁷ of the population, is excluded - something we are at a loss to understand.

The timing and format of the consultations were unsuited to proper participation in the process and the exclusion of women as a sectoral group is a particularly offensive manifestation of the lack of gender awareness on the part of those involved in drafting the documents.

⁶ NI Assembly Written Answers to Questions, Friday 1 Oct 2010, AQW 256/11
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/ganda/2007mandate/writtenans/2010/101001.htm>.

⁷ Census (2001)

2.7 Definitions

At our focus group session there was some confusion as to what exactly the words; 'cohesion', 'sharing' and 'integration' actually mean and how they are interpreted and enacted by the Department. The feeling was that the OFMDFM interpretations appeared to be very narrow yet there is a real opportunity to improve lives in Northern Ireland by utilising the full breadth of the definitions. For example; the definition of cohesion must be all encompassing and specifically name women and women's groups as having contributed to the development of peace, having a place in building the peace and the need for the women's sector to be positively encouraged into public life in a post conflict situation.

3.0 SHARED SPACE

3.1 Shared Space

The Draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration must consider the concepts of security and shared spaces from the perspective of women; the draft document betrays its origins in the predominantly male-dominated narratives about the conflict. These narratives do not recognise the gendered aspect to the conflict nor its impact. It also means that the draft CSI documents see women's needs and contribution as irrelevant.

The strategy should be redrafted to consider how all of the spaces it envisages may be made safe, shared and welcoming for women specifically. It needs to notice and address the fact that there is a dearth of safe open space where women feel comfortable.

NIRWN argues that the Strategy needs to address the specific concerns and needs of women and shared space, for example:

- When requiring all public authorities to “*discharge functions and deliver services equally and inclusively recognising the diverse nature of the community they serve*”, the strategy should ensure that this is being done specifically in relation to women. It needs to pay particular attention to women from a minority ethnic background who face significant and quite distinct barriers.

- When considering any unnecessary duplication of services, the impact of this upon the needs and requirements of women specifically should be considered.
- The process of “*Developing a culture of fairness, equality, rights, responsibilities and respect*” should be implemented to ensure that the rights of women are respected and promoted
- Any strategy around ‘*crisis intervention*’ must ensure that it will assist women who are the subject of hate crimes and other forms of violence, such as sexual assault and domestic violence
- Women who experience sectarianism, racial violence and hate crimes have specific needs and especially so women from a minority ethnic background who often find it difficult to access services
- Any proposed process of *community renewal* must specifically seek to involve and empower women, given the historical under-representation of women in political structures and public bodies.

There is sometimes a need for safe, reserved spaces – e.g. for women who want to start education in a woman friendly environment. There is no “one size fits all” approach - different people need different spaces as we live in a diverse society so we need space to understand each other’s issues.

3.2 Women and Secure Communities

The Draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration document refers frequently to the need for people to feel safe, but it does not mention the issue of women’s safety and our right to be free from violence. When discussing the issue of ‘*secure communities*’ the issue of women’s safety in public spaces and at home needs to be addressed.

Fear of crime is a prevalent issue today. Many people in Northern Ireland express anxiety and fear about crime and about being victimised. The level of fear that a person holds depends on many factors: gender, age, past experiences with crime, where someone lives, sexual orientation and their

ethnicity. All of these factors have an impact on fear levels. The links between social exclusion and the incidence of crime in deprived communities and the negative consequences especially for older people are well documented.

Gender has been found to be the strongest predictor of fear. Women have a much greater fear of crime than men. Women's fear comes mostly from their vulnerability to sexual aggression: women are ten times more likely to be sexually assaulted than are men⁸. Women have particular safety issues that need tackling specifically.

4.0 COHESION

4.1 Delivery/ Value for Money

NIRWN's view is that; to circulate a draft strategy which is not fit for purpose is a huge waste of public resources at a time when those resources are very scarce. Those responsible for ensuring the efficiency of the use of public funds may wish to look at the process that led to the draft CSI strategy.

NIRWN is concerned that the draft document states that it is aimed at, "*eventually eliminating segregated services.*" In doing so, it betrays no awareness of the need to consider the specific requirements of women that might arise when eliminating segregated services (e.g. in health, family planning, adult education). This should not be utilised as an excuse to cut back much needed health and education provision in areas of significant social disadvantage.

4.2 Proposed Structures

Historically female representation has always been poor in Northern Ireland. Just as career paths like construction and business are considered non-traditional routes for women; so participation in public and political life can equally be considered traditionally male preserves. While women's representation in public bodies, local authorities and political parties has

⁸ Crowell, N & Burgess A (eds.) 1996, Understanding Violence Against Women

increased in the last thirty years, women are still far from being on a par with men; in some areas the shortfall of female participation is considerably more marked than others⁹. DETI's 2008 picture of *Women in Northern Ireland* provides the following detail:

- 33% of public appointments in Northern Ireland are held by women;
- On the 119 publicly appointed bodies in Northern Ireland, 23 Chair and Deputy Chair posts are held by women;
- Of the 108 members elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly in March 2007, 18 (17%) are women – we have one female MEP;
- 21% of local government councillors are women;
- 5 out of 26 District Councillors have a female Mayor / Chair as at July 2008¹⁰

Therefore the issue of appropriate gender representation needs to be integral to the membership and delivery of the new Structures.

Any strategy which is intended to “*build community support networks across community, cultural and minority ethnic groups*” must ensure that women are able to fully participate in these community networks. Women’s organisations should be fully entitled to be involved in these networks and be consulted and funded to fully participate.

4.3 Women and Community Renewal

The work that grass-roots women’s groups do is ignored in the draft CSI documents, as is the central role that women play (and have played in the past) in the leadership and improvement of local communities, particularly along interface areas. The role of women in helping to create the tentative peace that made the Good Friday Agreement possible has been written out of the Draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration which ignores the influence and impact of women in their communities.

⁹ Dr Helen Mc Laughlin, (2009) *Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation*

¹⁰ DETI (2008) *Women in Northern Ireland*, p 22

There is no doubt that a great deal of work has been undertaken by women to address the conflict and its impact, as well as promoting cohesion between communities. The authors of the CSI consultation documents however, seem either to be unaware of this work or, to regard it as irrelevant to the CSI policy process. Women's contribution to the resolution of the conflict and to peace-building has been and remains critical. Thus, where the draft CSI documents seek to “*support the local community to resolve local issues through local solutions*” there must be specific proposals to support and empower women to play a full role at community level.

The final Strategy must propose concrete measures for encouraging the involvement and participation of women. Any programme aimed at “*working with and supporting the local community to resolve contentious cultural issues*” must ensure that women are fully involved and empowered. Such programmes also need to ensure that the experience and wisdom of women and women’s organisations in this respect are valued, accessed and supported.

Similarly, when “*ensuring the sharing of best practice projects aimed at improving cohesion, sharing and integration*” the strategy must be redrafted to ensure that it draws upon the experience of women’s organisations.

5.0 INTEGRATION

5.1 Multiple Identities of Women

Any strategy aimed at “*encouraging community events which reflect cultural diversity and are open, welcoming and inclusive to all*” must ensure that it reflects the diversity of women’s lives and experiences. Such a strategy must be open, welcoming and inclusive to women, something the current strategy is not. Women must be involved and empowered in any multi-agency

partnerships between indigenous and minority ethnic and migrant worker communities.

The consultation document refers to *migrants* in several places, but illustrates no awareness that the difficulties and barriers faced by women migrants are significantly greater and different to those faced by men. A revised strategy should address this problem. Similarly the document refers to the needs of Travellers and their significant marginalisation, however, it does not acknowledge that the needs and experiences of Traveller women are different and need to be addressed in a very different way.

5.2 Engaging Women

As with the consultation and engagement processes NIRWN would expect that any consultation group should be gender balanced (taking account of CEDAW¹¹ and UN Security Resolution 1325¹²) and reflect the multiplicity of society in their locality.

Women comprise 51%¹³ of Northern Ireland's population and the new Programme and structures should reflect this. NIRWN holds the view that the lack of gender parity that exists throughout Northern Irish society is a key factor in hindering the development of a new, shared future which the Programme should be working towards helping achieve. It is imperative that the Programme addresses and reflects grass-roots concerns and views.

A bottom-up approach to inform response is required. It is important that there are opportunities to voice differing opinions. NIRWN argues that any consultation group should be gender balanced (taking account of CEDAW and UN Security Resolution 1325) and reflect the multiplicity of society in their locality.

¹¹ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations>

¹² <http://www.peacewomen.org/un/sc/1325.html> UNSCR 1325 emphasises the distinct position of women in conflict and post conflict situations. It calls on member states to act in several areas, including the promotion of women in decision making institutions

¹³ Census (2001)

A new CSI strategy must set measurable targets and timetables for the improvement of women's participation and representation in all of the decision making structures (e.g. government, local councils, community bodies, police and judiciary). Positive action, such as confidence building and family friendly measures are needed to ensure such participation.

5.3 Rural Women

Rural women experience life in a different way than urban women. Rural women experience further exclusion in Northern Ireland due to geography and isolation. A redrafted strategy needs to take consideration of infrastructure and transport which can significantly inhibit; cohesion, sharing and inclusion, especially for women living in rural areas.

Rural women must be consulted, included and represented in our society if cohesion, sharing and integration is to become a reality in Northern Ireland.

5.4 Young Women and Girls

There is a great deal of emphasis in the document on youth, but no awareness of the value of older people or, of the benefit of intergenerational working; where the experience of wise women is invaluable. This needs to be factored in to a revised strategy; there is a clear need to look specifically at the needs of young women and girls.

Whilst it is laudable to wish to "*support... young people to increase their civic responsibility including facilitating and empowering youth groups to work together on civic responsibility projects*" any such proposal must specifically target, involve and empower young women; particularly those most marginalised.

Similarly, any focus in education on promoting greater understanding of shared values must specifically address the issue of respect for women, especially considering the increase in violence against women and sexual assaults. When developing "*Zero tolerance*" for crimes motivated by

prejudice, offences against women, such as sexual assault and domestic violence must be included.

5.5 Women and Culture

A strategy aimed at “*building a peaceful climate of fairness, equality, rights, responsibilities and respect*” must do so in a way that promotes the rights of women as equal citizens and acknowledge the historic and continuing significant inequalities faced by women.

Where the strategy proposes encouraging “*greater engagement with, and understanding of, cultural diversity and intercultural relations,*” it must do so in a way that encourages a greater understanding of the contribution and importance of women in cultural diversity and intercultural relations.

5.6 Vulnerable Groups

Women should be included as a ‘vulnerable group’.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The concept and funding of 'good relations' work needs to be strategically linked to community development. There is a strong correlation between social disadvantage and some of the issues the CSI strategy is intended to tackle. A more coherent community development strategy would help to address this.

However, any good relations or community development strategy that does not acknowledge and address the issue of gender equality and the ongoing disempowerment of women will be a failure. The contribution of women and women's organisations should be recognised and women must be supported and empowered as leaders. A new redrafted strategy must make the issue of equality central.

The consultation document seeks views on the equality implications of the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration. This is despite the

very marked failings of the documents in relation to gender equality and the role and contribution of women, all of which is outlined above. There is no action plan for implementing any equality aspect of the draft CSI strategy and no targets, timetables and indicators for measuring progress. This needs addressed.