

27 March 2008

Pamela Marron  
Invest Northern Ireland  
Strategic Management and Planning  
Equality Unit, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor  
Bedford Square, Bedford Street  
Belfast BT2 7ES

Dear Ms Marron

**Response to the Consultation on the Invest NI Corporate Plan 2008-2011 and Equality Impact Assessment**

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 Department of Agricultural and Rural Development (DARD) and Department for Social Development (DSD) under the EU BSP Programme.

NIRWN has four key objectives:

- developing weak community infrastructure in areas where little or no community based rural women's groups exist,
- increasing rural women's capacity and opportunities to influence decision-making and policy formulation,
- running Northern Ireland wide communication campaigns with a local focus, highlighting the value of rural women's contribution,
- offering a training and capacity building programme to rural women across the region.

NIRWN welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Invest NI Corporate Plan 2008 -2011. NIRWN through its policy work strives to highlight the inequalities that rural women face. The last census showed that almost 63% of Northern Ireland's (NI) population live in rural areas. Quality employment opportunities are few and far between in many rural areas. Increasingly, only temporary or part-time jobs are available. Part-time jobs may suit some women, particularly those with young children, but in general there is a call for employment with better conditions.

NI is the worst region in the UK for female self-employment, with fewer than 4% of women in the labour force as self-employed, compared to 19% for men. (WRAISE, 2005).

Women in Northern Ireland are a 1/3 less likely to be entrepreneurs than men, and the gap between male and female is the widest of all the UK regions. Whilst acknowledging the particular differences involved as women approach entrepreneurship, it is interesting to note the following as a demonstration of the real gap and the economic potential. If as many women as men were engaged in early stage entrepreneurial activity in Northern Ireland this would lead to 28,500 more female entrepreneurs, making Northern Ireland the leading region in terms of entrepreneurship. (Invest NI, 2005).

The Women and Work Commission estimated that increasing women's participation in the labour market, and in higher paid occupations and roles, could be worth between £15bn and £23bn a year to the UK economy. NIRWN holds the belief that in a global economy, where competitive pressures continue to increase, we cannot afford to waste the potential talent and role that women have to play or allow discriminatory practices to hold people back.

Given the statistics presented, NIRWN is disappointed that Invest NI's Corporate Plan 2008- 2011 does not take the opportunity to make a specific reference to women. We believe that a strategic objective should specifically detail the new and existing incentives to support the economic investment of women. Direct inward investment should be used for the dual purpose of building prosperity and reducing inequality.

### **Recommendation**

**A gender specific approach is included in the Invest NI Corporate Plan 2008 – 2011.**

Invest NI Corporate Plan 2005 – 2008 highlighted a specific campaign 'Go for It', which incorporated media advertising, roadshows and special initiatives. The Corporate Plan stated *'Particular attention will be paid to promoting more entrepreneurship among women thus unlocking their economic potential'*.

NIRWN recognises the success of the Investing in Women Initiative with the representation of women using the Start a Business Programme increasing from 37% in 2003/04 to 44% in 2006/07. Despite the positive trends Invest NI, will no longer be running the programme. We hold the belief that in order to address the current inequalities that exist a long-term strategic approach should be incorporated within the Corporate Plan that details gender specific initiatives that will be sustainable. Although Invest NI have increased the number of female participants taking part in the Start a Business Programme, NIRWN predicts without the Investing in Women Initiative continuation this statistic is likely to decrease. An evaluation of Investing in Women Strategy (2004) highlighted that a major brake on female entrepreneurship in Northern Ireland is the continued fragmentation of the local business support system.

The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor study in 2002 found a continuing low level of female self-employment, with a concentration of work being in the lower paid service sector. Women face barriers to self-employment, the Small Business Service have found these barriers through their research to be; the supply of finance, the demand for finance, access to suitable advice and support. Women's access to finance is hindered by the use of credit scoring, as they are less likely to have a traceable credit history. Research also points to

the fact that women still encounter prejudice in their efforts to start and run a business in that they are more afraid of debt than men and they own fewer assets, so it will be a bigger risk for them to invest money. They are less likely to be able to provide collateral, and they perceive that lenders may be more prejudiced against them. Business support may not be flexible enough as working mothers may need childcare, and flexible transport to allow them to develop their ideas. (GEM, 2002).

**Recommendation**

**Investing in Women Initiative is continued.**

If you have any queries, or require further clarification on any of the points, please do not hesitate to contact me.

**Yours sincerely**

**Nora Smith  
Policy Officer  
NIRWN**