

Chief Commissioner  
Monica McWilliams  
Temple Court  
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Dear Monica McWilliams

As you will be aware Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) and Omagh Women's Area Network (OWAN) held a conference in Omagh on 22 October 2008 to discuss the potential implications of a Bill of Rights for rural women.

As part of our discussions there were a number of key issues that were raised specifically for rural women. At the heart of the discussion was the need for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland that should provide protection for those in most need and have least choice. I would like to bring to your attention the most salient issues raised at the conference.

### **Sexual and Domestic Violence**

While all the issues outlined are relevant for victims regardless of where they live, the very nature of rural environments increases the difficulties faced by victims of sexual and domestic violence because communities are small, people are often related, and they are closely inter-connected through work and social groups. These 'ties that bind' are even stronger during adverse events. The environment establishes a set of preconditions as follows:

- There is the fear of not being believed – by the justice system, by friends, by family members
- There is fear of having to cope with the justice system without any known support or immediate protection
- There is the fear of being isolated because of no immediate support systems; and very limited access to counselling services
- The isolation factor can create fear, shame, guilt and at the same time, allow the violence to continue
- There is the fear of confiding in friend or family member or neighbour in case that person breaks the confidentiality
- There is the fear of staying in the situation because of the effect on children and of greater violence and intimidation by the accused

- There is fear that possible separation from a partner can in itself create further violence
- There is the fear of taking children away from a familiar environment – away from their home, their school and their friends
- There is the fear of there being no 'safety net' after making the decision to leave the home situation
- There will be economic considerations for the victim leaving home without independent financial resources
- There is the fear of facing the community after making a complaint – of embarrassment, of not having conformed to traditional rural expectations
- There is the fear of not belonging anywhere and the anxiety creating depression/mental illness
- There is a lack of easily accessible information on the legal process
- With the closure of a number of rural police stations, leading to delayed response times to emergency calls, hinders the likelihood to report incidents and to contact the police.

Only in rural communities do these preconditions exist in total. All of them need to be considered if the criminal justice system is to be more responsive to the needs of victims and to ultimately improve reporting, conviction and sentence rates for sexual and domestic violence offenders. Therefore we advocate the need for a recommendation to Physical Integrity as outlined in the Final Report of the Bill of Rights Forum from the Women's report.

### **Health needs**

The rural population is pragmatic and does not expect to access all services locally but is increasingly concerned that the most basic of services, emergency response, primary care and maternity care are not be available locally. Omagh has lost acute services of maternity, A&E and cardiac. Difficulty in accessing health services within a reasonable time impacts on a community socially. People feel insecure and question their tenure in a rural area. This leaves communities vulnerable and weakened.

There are both physical and socio-cultural barriers in accessing health needs. Women with young children, older people, those with a low social class, farming families, ethnic minorities and the disabled are most likely to face barriers to access and suffer the consequences of distance decay.

Those present felt that for the future elder care and carers support provision need to be addressed. The current isolation older people and carers face particularly in rural areas is not being addressed and is a matter of rights, dignity and quality of life. It was felt too that our ambulance service is being diminished and under funded and this will be a particular difficult for rural people who are isolated and vulnerable.

Social exclusion and association to mental health problems is a major concern. Social exclusion may lead to or exacerbate mental health problems and/or disability due to their geographical status. This leaves rural women with mental health problems and/or learning disability even more vulnerable.

### **Funding/Value of Community & Voluntary Service provision**

The six rural women's networks [Fermanagh, Mid-Ulster, Omagh, Newry & Mourne, Roe Valley, South Armagh] are membership based organisations established by local women to articulate the voice of rural women across different areas of Northern Ireland. Many of the networks have had to shift from being development organisation to project-based, due to the lack of available funding. This has had serious implications for the long term sustainability of the networks and their work in supporting and working with local women. The important work that rural women's groups and networks carry out needs to be reflected in a sustainable funding programme from Government. A funding programme, that mirrors the valuable work and services (often provided with little/no funding) of the women's groups/centres/networks, and the community/voluntary sector as a whole.

The services that are provided are often the first point of contact for women, particularly those facing discrimination, where they can find information, support and a signposting service. The supportive environment of a women's group/centre provides a forum for women in crisis to confide, share and receive support. Therefore investment in a long term sustainable approach for sustaining regional, sub regional and local rural women's infrastructure is required.

### **Under representation of women on decision making boards**

Women are significantly under represented as elected representatives, 18 of the 108 Members of Local Assembly (MLAs) elected to the NI assembly are women, representing 16.7%. 18% of local Councillors are female. Women are under represented on Education and Library Boards and on Further Education Boards. It is broadly acknowledged that while women make up the majority actively involved in local rural community development, there is a minority of women in senior/decision making positions in key rural development organisations. Rural women face dual discrimination in terms of their gender and their locality. In many cases, Policy Planners lack information about the important role that rural women play. It is therefore necessary that rural women's multiple contributions to the family, to democracy and to development be acknowledged and properly valued. The undervaluing of rural women's contribution to development and their under-representation in decision-making has increased their marginalisation.

## **Attitudinal**

Traditional perceptions on the role of rural women are still prevalent. Challenging mindsets and attitudinal change will be vital and necessary if we are to enter the future as equal partners. Testing the traditional stereotype of the contented home-loving farm woman whose interests centre around her family as part of the perceived rural idyll will be key to attitudinal change.

## **Childcare**

There was a general acknowledgement that the lack of childcare provision in rural Northern Ireland is a major barrier to women to accessing other key services, education, employment, health. Responsibility of childcare lies predominantly with women. The structure of the world of paid work continues to favour individuals without dependents or caring responsibilities.

## **Transport**

Transport is inextricably linked to accessing other key services. Meeting rural transport needs would overcome access to vital services including, childcare, education, employment, as well helping to address the issue of social marginalisation that many rural women face. Those who suffer from poor transport are often those most in need of accessing services: older people, young people, women (often young mothers), living in one-car households, people living on low incomes and those with physical or mental health problems.

## **Concept of Rural**

There was a general consensus that Government policymaking and implementation does not take into consideration rural circumstances and needs. The centralisation of key services has led to a number of inequalities in the allocation of key services for rural areas.

## **Multiple identities of rural women**

Rural women straddle two sectors, gender and location. The added isolation, exclusion and discrimination of rural women who are lesbian, disabled, non-national, older, from the travelling community, face a number of inequalities. Elderly rural women's health care needs are a growing concern. A lesbian who lives in a rural context faces the same challenges of heterosexual rural women, however added to this are the challenges of stigma attached to their sexual orientation and isolation from their family and friends. This isolation can exacerbate the endemic loneliness of women and rural life.

NIRWN and OWAN urge that The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), consisting of 30 articles, defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. As a signatory to CEDAW, we therefore

advocate a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland which echoes the 30 articles for realising equality between men and women.

We would like to take this opportunity to add our support to the recommendations outlined in the Final Report of the Bill of Rights Forum and clauses relating to women. We advocate the need for a strong Bill of Rights that protects those in most need and least choice. That allows for substantive equality to address the inequalities that currently exist for rural women.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank Miriam Titterton for attending the event on behalf of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

Yours sincerely

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NIRWN

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