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Northern Ireland
Rural Women's Network

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Rural Women's Network (NIRWN's)
Response To

**'Strengthening Women's
Voices in Government'**

Government Equalities Office

Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)

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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 attended the Launch of the - Strengthening Women's Voices in Government on May 13th in The Pavilion, Stormont Castle to participate in an open discussion on a new model for engaging and listening to women in the UK and the details are set out below:

1.4 NIRWN's comments in relation to the 'Strengthening Women's Voices in Government' consultation are set out below.

2.0 COMMENTS

2.1 With regard to the GEO's online survey, NIRWN is concerned about its structure. It is paramount that the GEO acknowledges that a hierarchical approach is counterproductive to capturing women's voices and that its engagement strategy must reflect the totality of women's experiences. With regard to the structure of the survey, questions which rank preferences encourage the narrow categorization of issues and restrict women's capacity to respond. To effectively strengthen women's voices in government the GEO must capture the diversity of women's lives and the totality of their experiences.

2.2 Much of rural Northern Ireland does not have adequate Broadband access; so to engage women's views through an online survey simply fails to capture the views of the majority of rural women in our region. Online engagement presents clear issues in terms of access to IT. Many women are not computer literate, do not own computers or have access to IT due to the closure of libraries. Many women live in rural areas where there is limited broadband access and in addition this engagement method will largely exclude elderly women, disabled women (in particular blind women) and women for whom English is their second language. We are concerned about how marginalised groups will be able to contribute to the IT platform and that by using this method, their concerns may be overlooked.

2.3 NIRWN is concerned that the proposal of online voting buttons on the website may capture populist views which do not represent the diverse experiences of women. We hope that the GEO will take the needs of minority women into account in all decision making processes and will weight feedback provided on the website accordingly. In light of this, we also hope that the GEO recognises the opportunity for potential abuse of the voting mechanisms on the website, and ask that it closely moderates the site to see who engages on it. Some groups may wish to use the IT

Platform as a way of promoting certain agendas and the dominance of different views, which may not support women's rights.

2.4 When the IT platform is designed it is essential that it is easy read, accessible and informative. The GEO must recognise that the women's sector and individuals have diverse needs and that the information posted on the website is of interest to both target audiences. NIRWN hope that the website is interactive and provides a hub where women's organisations can engage with government. NIRWN would like the opportunity to provide ongoing feedback on the quality of the website and to help to feed in and refine its content to ensure that it effectively meets the needs of rural women in Northern Ireland. We would also be interested in what the GEO plans to do with the information submitted to the website and how we might feed into this.

2.5 NIRWN believes that all of the engagement methods outlined are a powerful mechanism for engagement with women and should be employed together as part of a comprehensive strategy. We do ask however, that the GEO acknowledges the limitations of each activity and works together with the women's sector to promote and meet the needs of rural women.

2.6 NIRWN believes that it is pivotal that the GEO engages with women and women's organisations across all equalities strands and ensures outreach both locally, in different regions and in the devolved nations.

2.7 Whilst welcoming devolved Governments NIRWN argues that it is important to recognise that there are many Government responsibilities which still remain driven by Whitehall such as:

- Pensions and welfare
- Negotiations and implementation of international and European directives and resolutions

- the development of Whitehall policies which have a positive impact on women but on in England and Wales

At a meeting of 32 women representing 21 organisations in December 2010 the discussion highlighted the experience of women in Northern Ireland in engaging with Whitehall and reported:

- marginalised by Whitehall officials and Ministers
- lack of attention to facilitate inclusion
- not being invited to key events
- no resources to provide travel to ensure inclusion
- different equality and human rights regime and recognition that its equality legislation lags behind
- unfair treatment such as health and reproductive rights
- recognising it as a unique part of the UK emerging out of a 40 year conflict

2.8 NIRWN asks that the GEO acknowledges the loss of a coordinating body following the abolition of the WNC and works together with women's infrastructure bodies on a new gender architecture.

2.9 The Coalition Government decided in 2010 to abolish a number of organisations. One of them was the Women's National Commission (WNC) whose 40 years purpose and its strength was its ability to draw the views of women from across the UK to create the conditions in which women could find their voice and communicate to government.

The abolishment has led to a weakening of the infrastructure of the women's sector at a local-national level. Any new structure will have to include the role of WNC who bridged the gap at the local/national level by the following actions:

- providing representation in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and held regular meetings with partner organisations to listen to and share interests and concerns
- holding quarterly European and International meetings with organisations with diverse membership and connections to European and international institutions
- co-ordinating a national response to local women's key issues (e.g. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and women in Northern Ireland), while co-ordinating a wider UK response to shape key policies and mechanisms (e.g. the UK NGO shadow report to CEDAW)
- advising government at a UNECE / UN level and acting as a conduit between government and the sector at CSW / Beijing conferences through co-ordinated meetings and feedback session

Any national machinery on women should delivery the positive role of the WNC as identified above.

2.10 NIRWN appreciates the consultation's focus on utilising the expertise of the women's sector and NIRWN is committed to helping the GEO achieve its aims. As part of this partnership we ask that the GEO acknowledges and addresses the capacity issues faced by women's organisations and takes action to support our financial sustainability and resources to engage.

2.11 NIRWN believes that there are important issues about the capacity of women's organisations to engage in the GEO's activities and they must be appropriately supported and resourced to participate. For example, to make sure that a wide group of women's organisations attend, the GEO would need to pay for expenses and travel to and from events. Many organisations will have few full-time staff let alone any dedicated policy

staff who can work on engagement. Those few staff that do have capacity however often experience difficulties in terms of the times of meetings and accessibility of affordable child care. The GEO should take these issues into consideration when planning future events to make them as inclusive as possible.

2.12 The GEO's strategy focuses on how it plans to strengthen women's voices in government however it does not explain how it intends to assess its progress. We would like the GEO to produce further information about the evaluation and monitoring of the strategy and consult on this with the women's sector.

2.13 Looking ahead NIRWN hopes that the GEO will work together with the women's sector to ensure that the government fulfils its obligations to promote and protect the rights of women. We hope the GEO will secure cooperation and commitment across government departments and interact with local politicians. Given the devolution of power to a local level, it is important gender equality is promoted in local communities and that the GEO's strategy translates to local action. Finally, we ask the GEO to allow women's organisations to feed into the strategy on an ongoing basis and to allow us to strengthen the quality of this work by ensuring it meets all women's needs.

2.14 The women's sector is an important intermediary between national policy and individual women and we hope that the GEO's future priorities will reflect this. Women's organisations such as NIRWN are often best placed to raise the issues, needs and concerns of their members and service users and offer a direct way to contact large groups of women from a wide variety of communities and often those who are the most marginalised and do not access other services.

2.15 Whilst NIRWN supports the principles of the GEO's strategy, our capacity to engage is limited due to a lack of sustainable funding. To meaningfully engage with the GEO and ensure that the strategy is a

success, women's organisations must be financially supported and resourced.

2.16 One of NIRWN's key concerns is the GEO's proposals to commission organisations and businesses to gather women's views. We are eager that this method provides a snapshot and is not a tick box exercise and employs the skills of those with specialist expertise. We do not think that it would be appropriate to commission businesses, as a market driven approach would be unsuitable and we question their ability to represent women's voices. Businesses do not have an in-depth understanding of women's issues nor the unique reach to women that women's organisations have built through trust and years of experience.

2.17 In addition to the issue of individuality, NIRWN is also mindful of the narrative of fairness that is interwoven in the introductory comments of the consultation document. We agree with this emphasis but stress that fairness is substantive equality, as outlined in Article 1 of the CEDAW Convention¹. We ask that the government and the GEO take action to remove the structural barriers to women's progress and work together with women's organisations on this issue.

2.18 As a final comment, NIRWN is particularly concerned that the consultation is primarily focused on communication methods and not the key issues facing women. Women's organisations have felt a strong level of frustration on the progress of women's issues in the UK and have provided research and evidence in the past to support the GEO's work, but have subsequently been re-consulted on the same topics. We ask that the GEO moves forward with the women's sector to ensure that action is taken on issues such as Violence Against Women and Girls, and that former information that has been provided by women's organisations on particular policy topics are also taken into account.

¹ UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Article 1
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm#article1>