

Welcome to the 4th edition of the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN's) Policy Bulletin. There have been a number of policy developments since the previous edition in December 2008, which all have the potential to impact on our lives as rural dwellers.

Below is a summary of the work that NIRWN has been involved in over the last 4 months. We hope you find it an interesting read.

Recent Responses and Activities

Community Safety Unit Five Year Draft Strategy 'Together, Stronger, Safer'



There were a number of concerns that we raised in our response, namely the lack of consideration given to rural areas within the draft Strategic Plan. Given the closure of rural police stations, and the reduction in police resources, this presents huge difficulties for people living in rural and remote areas. Rurality presents problems such as distance, isolation, lack of services, and smaller populations. We highlighted the links between social exclusion and the fear of crime, especially for older people. We highlighted that gender has been found to be the strongest predictor of fear. Women have a much greater fear of crime than men.

A key concern that we raised was the need to carry out an Equality Impact Assessments (EQIA) on the proposals contained within the Strategy. An equality focus questions the impact of the proposals. We are particularly concerned with the adverse impact on women and young people that the proposals may have.

Department of Social Development (DSD) Warm Home Schemes



We used this opportunity to highlight the rural challenges that exist in terms of addressing fuel poverty and accessing the Warm Homes Scheme. The Warm Homes Scheme is a grant programme from DSD that is available for heating and insulation improvements.

Some of key points highlighted in the response included:

- Rates of housing unfitness are higher in rural areas than in urban areas
- In rural areas of Northern Ireland, 33% of pensioners live in households experiencing income poverty
- Older homeowners are finding it difficult to cope with the rising cost of living, particularly energy costs
- The fear of fuel poverty is causing older homeowners to behave in ways which are placing them at risk
- In Northern Ireland, the highest prevalence of fuel poverty is found among older people living alone
- Very high rates of fuel poverty are experienced by both households with low income and single pensioners
- A culture of self-sufficiency dominates in rural areas.

It is a means tested scheme, which means that many rural dwellers that live in fuel poverty, cannot access the scheme.

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland Corporate Plan 2009 -2012



In this response we acknowledged that one of the Equality Commission's greatest strengths has been its ability to use its power to speak out on issues that matter for women, highlighting inequalities on pay, flexibility at work, support for carers, women's pensions and much more. However the draft Corporate Plan failed to mention, and therefore acknowledge the nature and impact of gender based discrimination on women's lives in Northern Ireland. The draft plan failed to highlight or address gender inequalities. We stated in our response that the vision for the Equality Commission not been set from a gendered analysis of inequality, including a necessary focus on the multiple disadvantage experienced by women.

The BIG Lottery Fund Strategic Framework 2009-2015



Transition and isolation are the two key themes for this Framework. We felt that the themes were relevant for Northern Ireland, given its transition from conflict to peace.

We highlighted the key role that women and women's organisations have played in this process. That it is vital that funding to build capacity of women at grass roots levels to address inequalities continues. Also the Review of Public Administration (RPA) will present huge changes in the decentralisation of decision making. It is vital that women are key players in new Community Planning structures. Women are currently under represented on regional, sub regional and grass roots decision making bodies/groups yet women make up 51% of the population in Northern Ireland (NI). Regional and sub-regional women's organisations will need the necessary resources to empower women and women's groups, from different geographic areas to come together within their new RPA council areas to facilitate this engagement. Isolation is pertinent to women. Social exclusion is perceived to be a problem predominantly for a random collection of individuals in poverty rather than specific groups of people who are systematically disadvantaged due to structural inequalities.

Department of Agricultural and Rural Development (DARD) Anti Poverty/Social Inclusion Framework



We commended DARD on this proactive step to address the issues of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas through this Framework. The Framework identified five key themes:

1.Fuel Poverty 2.Transport Poverty 3.Childcare 4.Community Development 5.Rural Challenge Fund

In this response we highlighted that equality between women and men is a human right as well as an effective way of reducing poverty. This applies to poverty in all its forms, lack of access to employment, education, health, transport, information, advice, power and influence. NIRWN's work is intrinsically linked to the struggle against poverty and social exclusion for rural women in Northern Ireland. Poverty is not merely a question of a lack of money or resources. It refers just as much to a lack of power and the possibility to make choices. Discrimination based on gender is one cause of poverty and social exclusion and one of the greatest obstacles to equitable and sustainable development.

Rural White Paper

The Department of Agricultural and Rural Development (DARD) have established a working group made up of rural stakeholders, to help to form the Rural White Paper for Northern Ireland. The group consists of an array of organisations including NIRWN. To date the group has met twice. One of the first key roles for the stakeholder group was to identify the key challenges for rural areas. We highlighted the need to tackle rural poverty and social exclusion, transport, childcare health and social care, education and training.

As part of our on-going work, we will be highlighting the key issues for rural women, to help to shape the Rural White Paper.

The Rural Women's Policy Forum

The Rural Women's Policy Forum will be holding its next meeting in partnership with NICVA Women's Policy Forum on **Wednesday 29 April 2009** at The Community Relations Council, Linen Green, Dungannon.

Is this Policy Bulletin useful? We welcome any comments that you have on this Policy Bulletin. Did you find it useful? Is there any other information that you would like to see included? Please contact us with your feedback. If you would like to be included in our circulation list regarding policy consultations, please contact our Policy Officer Nora Smith on 028 86769191 or email nora@nirwn.org.uk

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