

Welcome to the third edition of NIRWN's Policy Bulletin. This newsletter provides you with a synopsis of policy responses that we have carried out since our last update and also what we are currently working towards. It is important that our policy responses are reflective of the concerns and issues that rural women face in their daily lives.

Rural Champion - The Department of Agricultural and Rural Development **Recent Responses and Activities**

consultation on the concept of a Rural Champion for Northern Ireland has now closed. NIRWN consulted with over 135 rural women, to gauge their opinions and perspectives on the potential opportunities that a Rural Champion could bring. The general consensus from our consultation exercises was that urban-made policies do not fit rural communities. The economic and social development needs of rural communities, and particularly those of rural women, are not well served by government policies because these policies do not account for rural realities. We made a number of recommendations as part of our response. Some of the key points that we highlighted include:

- The undervaluing of rural women's contribution to development and their under-representation in decision-making have increased their marginalisation. There are many economic, democratic and social differentials unique to rural women which need consideration at policy design stage, therefore we advocate the need to gender-proof policies.
- There is recognition that the rural proofing process is not being effectively implemented. This raises a number of fundamental questions. Is it due to the presence of bureaucratic and departmental boundaries? Is it the different cultures, aims and incentives of Government departments or a combination of both?
- Rural proofing should become a statutory function which is monitored and audited by an external appointment, who has powers to name and shame. It is time that detailed rural impact assessments of all policies is legislated in the same way that section 75 impact assessments are carried out.

We would welcome information relating to the resources allocated and timeframes for the fulfilment of the rural champion roles. NIRWN's full response is available from our website, www.nirwn.org.uk

Bill of Rights - Omagh Women's Area Network in partnership with NIRWN held a recent conference to deliberate the implications of a Bill of Rights for rural women with over 70 rural women in attendance. As part of our discussions there were a number of key issues 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 with least choice. As a follow up from the conference, a letter was presented to the Chief Commissioner, Monica McWilliams, which highlighted the key concerns raised at the meeting. These included:

- Sexual and Domestic Violence
- Health needs
- Funding/Value of Community & Voluntary Service provision
- Under representation of women on decision making boards
- Attitudinal
- Childcare
- Transport
- Concept of Rural
- Multiple identities of rural women

Section 75 Effectiveness Review - The Equality Commission consulted on its Revision of the Guide to Section 75 Statutory Duties. The consultation considered robust arrangements, with an increase in the obligations arising out of screening/filtering and equality impact assessments. The outcome being that Statutory bodies implement their duties under Section 75. We welcomed the review, particularly the following points raised:

- Care should be taken to ensure that local issues and demographics in relation to Section 75 categories are also reflected when assessing impact
- The Interdependence of equality and good relations
- Consideration must be given to how best to communicate the equality scheme to children, young people, people with a learning disability and ethnic minority communities
- Section 75 means that public authorities are bound to have regard to the need for affirmative action when considering their duty.
- There has to be a minimum period of twelve weeks for consultations on Equality Impact Assessments.

Further clarification was required on the following points:

- Information is required on the content of a filtering report, and how it is different from an equality impact assessment.
- The filtering process proposed is very prescriptive, which may hinder the process of mainstreaming equality. This contradicts with the ethos of equality mainstreaming.

With reference to demographics in relation to Section 75, consideration should also be given to cross referencing section 75 groups i.e. women from travelling communities, women with disabilities, women from ethnic communities. 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.

Get involved and have your opportunity to influence Government Policy through the Rural Women's Policy Forum - Wednesday 3 December 2008 The Rural Women's Policy Forum provides an opportunity for those with an interest in gender and rural issues to consider and discuss government policies. It meets on a quarterly basis, and is unique, in that its focus is on rural women. The meeting simplifies government policy and allows for open and informal debate and discussion on the implications of policy for rural women. Our next meeting will be held on Wednesday 3 December in the Community Relations Council, The Linen Green, Moygashel, Dungannon from 10.30am to approx 1.15pm. Lunch is provided at the close of the meeting. Further details are available on our website www.nirwn.org.uk

On the horizon.....

Rural Development Programme (RDP) and Peace III - Unfortunately progress has been slow in the allocation of funding under the RDP and PEACE III. It is now estimated that a call for applications will be made in March /April 2009 for both programmes. However both programmes provide potential opportunities for rural women and rural women's groups. Therefore we are at an important stage of considering potential opportunities for funding. Both funding programmes will be discussed at the Rural Women's Policy Forum meeting on the 3 December. NIRWN will also host a number of information events on the programmes in the New Year.

Department of Social Development (DSD) Policy Review of the Warm Homes Scheme - The Report to the Northern Ireland Assembly by the Comptroller and Auditor General highlighted that rural households are more likely to be harder to heat. Grants are not directed towards the least energy efficient homes. The Northern Ireland Audit Office found that in 2006-07 30% were awarded to energy efficient households, which were at little risk of fuel poverty. In addition, the scheme has not addressed the problem of 'hard to treat' homes, typically older, solid walled homes in rural areas. We will use our response to highlight the need to allocate grants to those in most need, especially elderly people who have to choose between eating and heating. The closing date for responses is Friday 19 December. Further information on the consultation will be discussed at the Rural Women's Policy Forum meeting on the 3 December. If you are unable to attend and would like to highlight a particular point for inclusion in the response, please contact our Policy Officer.

Rural White Paper - In early 2009 The Department of Agricultural and Rural Development will consider issues for inclusion in a Rural White Paper for Northern Ireland. NIRWN anticipates that The Rural White Paper will be the most significant public assessment of rural policy in Northern Ireland. We advocate that The Rural White Paper must examine the provision of a joined up approach across government to rural policy.

- ◆ How can policy be flexibly designed to meet the needs of rural communities, as well as urban ones?
- ◆ How can rural service providers be better supported in policy to serve their local contexts?

The Rural White Paper will be one of the key issues discussed at the Rural Women's Policy Forum meeting on Wednesday 3 December. Keith Morrison, Head of Policy with DARD will be there to provide an overview. This will be an important response that NIRWN will be making, to ensure that gender is considered as part of an overview of rural policy. We will be holding a number of workshops with rural women and rural women's groups early in 2009.

USEFUL READING

Amnesty International, UK Violence Against Women, September 2008

A group of University of Ulster students undertook a survey of 715 students at the four University of Ulster campuses across Northern Ireland considering their perspectives on violence against women. It presents some startling findings including:

- 44% of respondents answered that a woman is totally responsible or partially responsible for being raped or sexually assaulted if she is drunk
- 46% of respondents answered that a woman is totally responsible or partially responsible for being raped or sexually assaulted if she has acted in a flirtatious manner
- 30% of respondents answered that a woman is totally responsible or partially responsible for being raped or sexually assaulted if she is wearing sexy or revealing clothes
- 9% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that it is acceptable for a boyfriend/partner to hit a girlfriend if she refuses to have sex with him

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 - Contact details below.

NORTHERN IRELAND RURAL WOMEN'S NETWORK
15 Molesworth Street, Cookstown, BT80 8NX
T: 028 8676 9191 F: 028 8676 5644 E: info@nirwn.org.uk

