



Women On Boards: Call for Evidence



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Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP)

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1.0 Introduction to WCRP

1.1 WCRP Vision

“Our vision is of communities where women are recognised and valued as equal partners working towards a future based upon shared values of equality, participation and inclusion.”

1.2 WCRP Mission Statement

“To work in partnership to support and strengthen the voice of community based women’s organisations.”

1.3 Background

The Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) is a partnership of four lead regional women's organisations linking with fourteen frontline women's organisations across Northern Ireland to provide support and services to women living in disadvantaged areas.

1.4 The four key lead partners of the Partnership are the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), Women's Support Network (WSN), Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) and The Women's Centre, Derry. The fourteen Women's Centres are spread across Northern Ireland with seven from the Greater Belfast and Lisburn area, four in the North West and three in Dungannon, Magherafelt and Craigavon. Together the WCRP seeks to develop and strengthen a regional infrastructure which will support community based women's organisations across Northern Ireland.

1.5 The WCRP partnership aims to encourage collaborative and strategic work on key areas such as influencing policy; identifying needs and gaps in relation to training, education and childcare services; improving communication on good practice and lessons learnt across the sector; and sourcing potential sources of funding.

1.6 The women’s sector has played a key role in building and promoting, social, economic and political change in Northern Ireland. A review carried out in 2001 highlighted that through its infrastructure, comprising regional support organisations, networks, women’s centre’s, and local groups engaged in a diverse range of activities, it has made a valuable contribution to promoting

equality, social and economic inclusion, peace-building, and the development of the voluntary sector and volunteering¹.

- 1.7** The WCRP tackle women's inequality and disadvantage and support community development in the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities and work for policy change. The principles of inter dependence, co-operation, participation, representation and good practice are at the heart of the partnership's work.
- 1.8** The WCRP infrastructure and its partner organisations, have for many years been actively working to address the barriers women in Northern Ireland face in participating in public life. Women often experience different barriers to men and these are outlined clearly in our research '*Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation*' Dr Helen Mc Laughlin, (2009).
- 1.9** Our experience is that women are not reluctant to engage in Public Life when the right environment and conditions are created and every attempt to remove barriers is made.
- 1.10** The WCRP welcomes the opportunity to share with you our views and our Research² - ***See Attached*** on women on boards and public life.

2.0 The Picture in Northern Ireland

- 2.1** Gender differentials exist at all levels in Northern Ireland and it is these differentials which can still negatively influence the lives of rural women in Northern Ireland in terms of accessing opportunities and resources and their full participation in social, economical and political life. The 'Gender Equality Strategy' for Northern Ireland³ recognises that:

'treating men and women the same – that is being 'gender neutral' - is not the solution to eradicating gender inequality' (p.15)

¹ *Where to from Here: A New Paradigm for the Women's Sector in Northern Ireland*. NIVT, 2001.

² '*Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation*.' Dr Helen Mc Laughlin, 2009.

³ OFMDFM. *A Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2006-2016*. The Gender Equality Unit. 2006.

and later:

'treating men and women the same will not ensure equal outcomes because of the different experiences of women and men and the different economic and social positions occupied by them'

2.2 The WCRP believes the diversity of our society should be reflected in our public institutions and Boards. Women are currently very under-represented in public and political life in Northern Ireland:

*'figures indicate that women are under-represented in both applicants and appointees.'*⁴

2.3 DETI's 2008 picture of *Women in Northern Ireland* provides the following detail:

- 33% of public appointments in Northern Ireland are held by women;
- On the 119 publicly appointed bodies in Northern Ireland, 23 Chair and 7 Deputy Chair posts are held by women;
- Of the 108 members elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly in March 2007, 18 (17%) are women – we have one female MEP;
- 21% of local government councillors are women;
- 5 out of 26 District Councillors have a female Mayor / Chair as at July 2008⁵

2.4 The Women's Resource and Development Agency's report 'The Grass Ceiling: Audit of Women in Rural Areas in the North of Ireland' 2006 provides a statistical overview of women in rural society in terms of gender representation on decision making bodies. The findings include:

- only 17.8% of elected councillors in rural areas are women;
- of the 20 rural councils, there is just one female Chair and one female Chief Executive;
- 36.9% of women are employed at Principal Officer grade within government, with women under-represented in the most senior positions;
- Women make up only 28% of governing bodies at FE colleges.

⁴ *Report of the short term Working Group on Diversity in Public Appointments.* OPACNI 2005.

⁵ *Women in Northern Ireland.* DETI 2008 (p.22).

3.0 Summary of Our Research

3.1 Impact of Women's Under Representation

- **Lower Quality Decisions** - Greater participation from people of all backgrounds – genuine diversity at board level means greater accountability and a more highly functioning democratic process.
- **A perpetuation** - Low levels of female participation in any area of work has the effect of embedding and multiplying the problem of low female participation. Most obviously, it sends a message that certain jobs are not for women and limits the number of available female role models.
- **The multiplier effect** - Low levels of female participation also has a multiplier effect which can undermine the attempts of some public bodies to achieve equal participation.
- **Lower representation groups** - Only 3% of public appointments in Northern Ireland are held by people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Women with disabilities are just as invisible at public and political level. Of 1,672 public appointments made in 2007/2008, only 8 of these people had a declared disability. The figures for the representation of young people at public and political level suggest that young women are also seriously underrepresented. Only 34 of those appointed are under 40 years old, and six are under the age of 30.

3.2 Barriers to Women's Participation

- Childcare allowances
- Impact on benefits
- Travel and Transport
- Timing
- Perceptions of public and political Life
- Lack of skills and confidence
- The application process⁶

Our research provides a detailed analysis of each of these barriers beginning on page 120.

4.0 Training

⁶ *Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation*. Dr Helen Mc Laughlin, 2009.

Northern Ireland is fortunate to have a training course to prepare participants for undertaking a Board position. The course is well recognised, being the only one of its kind in the UK and Ireland and is supported by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland.

To date over 45 women have successfully completed the 'Participating on Public Sector Boards Get on Board' training through the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network; delivered by Belfast Metropolitan College.

The 'Get on Board' training provides women with a clear understanding of what it takes to be successful both during the appointments process and whilst serving on a Board and gives the confidence to make applications to bring their skills into the public arena.

4.1 Outputs of Training

To date, of the 208 people who have completed the programme, 70% were women, 20% were under the age of 40 and 69% were from outside Belfast. In terms of the 37 people who have secured a position on a board, 72% were women⁷.

4.2 Impact of Training

A former rural participant on the 'Get on Board' programme, Helen Wilson, remembered feeling conscious that so many boards she was aware of "seemed to be all men", and she recalled feeling "daunted by this man's world". She felt that the course had given her an insight into the workings of public bodies, and that visits from the Commissioner for Public Appointments and female politicians had made her feel that participation was possible.

As a result, she has joined the District Policing Partnership for her area, and observes that, "Once you're in there, you realise the men are human too and it's not so difficult." For this participant, the course made the difference between putting herself forward or not. As she put it, "Only for the course, I'd never have gone for it." (Helen Wilson interview, March 2009).

End.

⁷ CPANI 14th Annual Report 2008-2009.