



Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP)

Response to

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Reaching out to the whole community
Corporate Plan 2009- 2012

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 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 providing support and services to disadvantaged areas.
- 1.2 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 supports community based women's organisations across Northern Ireland.
- 1.3 We welcome the opportunity to comment on the Equality Commission's draft Corporate Plan which is currently being consulted on. We recognise that the Corporate Plan will shape the focus of the Equality Commission's work over the next three years.
- 1.4 We appreciate that a Corporate Plan is a strategic document in terms of the work the Commission aims to undertake and that the detail of the Commission's work will be contained within its business plans. The benefit of corporate strategic planning ultimately allows for the achievement of long-term organisational goals.
- 1.5 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. Indeed a recent publication by the Equality Commission highlighted that the highest proportion of queries to the Commission helpline were gender related matters.¹ We welcome the support and guidance that the Equality Commission has provided to highlight gender inequalities since its inception in 1999. Unfortunately the stark reality of gender based discrimination is still all pervasive.
- 1.6 WCRP's main concern in reading the draft Corporate Plan is that it fails to mention, and therefore acknowledge the nature and impact of gender based discrimination on women's lives in Northern Ireland. The draft plan fails therefore to highlight or address gender inequalities. We believe that the vision has not been set from a gendered analysis of inequality,

¹ Equality Commission (2007) Statement of Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland

including a necessary focus on the multiple disadvantage experienced by women.

- 1.7 McCrudden² (2004) suggests the focus needs to be on those groups in society who experience more inequality. He also states that Section 75 should be seen as an attempt to give greater focus to the disadvantage position of women than had previously been the case. Furthermore Section 75 requires public bodies to consider how each policy can be redesigned to promote gender equality and where necessary positive action measures to be adopted. Without a clear statement of commitment from the Equality Commission in its Corporate Plan, we are concerned that public bodies will not take the legal obligation to address gender inequalities seriously.

2.0 Comments on the Strategic Priorities

2.1. To reach out of the whole community

We welcome the commitment of the Commission to reach out to all sections of our communities, with a focus on the protestant community. However women in Northern Ireland make up 51% of the population³. The strategy fails to highlight that gender intersects with other forms of discrimination and disadvantage. The impact of multiple identities needs to be highlighted. It is essential to acknowledge that some women may be disadvantaged further by race, religion, disability, age, traveling community etc. A gender based analysis respects and appreciates the diversity that stems from our multi-identities.

2.2 Promoting equality and good relations

We note that there currently is no clear definition of equality of opportunity and promoting good relations in relation to Section 75. We would recommend that the Equality Commission, in consultation with stakeholders, develop such a definition so that all public authorities start their equality work from the same basis.

We are disappointed that under the strategic objectives it did not highlight the difficulties for women in accessing, retaining and progressing in the field of employment. In a publication from The Equality Commission it highlighted that scope still remains both in terms of improving the accessibility of employment and of ensuring progression within employment into a wider range of occupations and of grades for women⁴.

² 2004 McCrudden C, 2004, Mainstreaming Equality in Northern Ireland 1998 – 2004, in McLaughlin, E & Feris N, Section 75 Review, Belfast

³ Census 2001

⁴ Equality Commission (2007) Statement of Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland

We believe there has been a missed opportunity to highlight the importance of gender mainstreaming employment policies. As a good practice measure we feel that the draft plan should draw specific attention to this fundamental principle and recommend that all employment policies and procedures are gender proofed as standard good practice. Gender proofing employment practices will lead to better equality of opportunity for both women and men, by systematically addressing practices and attitudes in the world of work.

2.3. Effecting change through strategic enforcement and challenging discrimination

To date Government has not considered the full range of actions that are presently permitted within the legislation to address inequalities. We advocate that the Equality Commission uses this opportunity to highlight the need for public bodies to use the full range of measures in the anti-discrimination legislation to address underlying and long term gender inequalities. Substantive equality is evolving from a narrow concept of formal equality of treatment, to become a strategy to evaluate and address result and outcome in introducing laws and policies to accelerate gender equality and justice. We would like to see a commitment from the Equality Commission to the promotion of positive action to endorse a strategic approach to challenge discrimination and the enforcement of anti-discriminatory legislation within the Corporate Plan.

2.4. Influencing public policy and service delivery

We welcome the recent Section 75 Effectiveness review, and agree that more emphasis on the intended impact and outcomes of Section 75 is required. This, as opposed to compliance with a strict process, might allow more creative approaches and ultimately better results.

We feel that a specific reference to UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) should be included in this section. The Convention entered force in 1981 and was ratified by the UK government in 1986. CEDAW provides a comprehensive, consistent, effective, proactive and strategic platform to address discrimination. CEDAW moves beyond single issues, and single identity. Using a human rights framework helps bring together diverse communities, working on multiple issues to be proactive and strategic in advancing and addressing inequalities.

The Equality Commission's Shadow Report on CEDAW⁵, provides a comprehensive independent, objective assessment, that focuses on the most prominent concerns of women in Northern Ireland. We congratulate

⁵ Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2008), CEDAW Report, United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, March 2008

ECNI on this important review. The report highlights a number of inequalities that the Government needs to address. The report states 'inequality between women and men persists in all areas of social, economic and political life in Northern Ireland'. Therefore we recommend that a commitment in the Strategic Plan is given, to continue its important work on CEDAW. CEDAW is a powerful tool that serves for the purposes of articulating, advocating, and monitoring women's human rights. The Equality Commission is best placed to provide a Watchdog role to ensure that the Northern Ireland government provides the highest international standards relating to women as outlined in CEDAW.

2.5 **Working for a better legal framework**

Section 2 of the document provides a list of relevant legislation that provides the Equality Commission with its powers and duties. Central to the list given is the need to promote gender equality and address gender discrimination. However this is not highlighted within the draft report. We also feel that specific reference to the United Kingdom obligations under European Union, and international legislation to promote equality for men and women and to ensure a gender perspective in all government policies and programmes should be highlighted in the Corporate Plan.

The Beijing Platform for Action⁶ identified twelve critical areas for concern for priority action to achieve the advancement of and empowerment of women, which is consistent with and fully conforms to the purposes and principles of international norms.

Signatory Governments have agreed to a common development agenda, with gender equality and women's empowerment as underlying principles to redress inequalities between women and men.

We welcome the commitment of the Equality Commission to respond to developments in legislation, notably the Equality Bill for Great Britain and the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. We believe that both present unique opportunities to simplify the law to empower women's equality rights.

3.0 **Other comments**

- 3.1 The Equality Commission has acknowledged gaps in legislation in protection against discrimination. We would welcome a commitment to the extension of Section 75 to consider inequalities between urban and rural areas. There are a number of urban/rural disparities in health, employment, education, public representation, housing, health and social care. We strongly advocate for the need to include rural and urban considerations in equality legislation.

⁶ Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, para 297 UN, DAW, September 1995, New York

3.2 WCRP is of the view that the Corporate Plan should be redrafted in order to acknowledge and specify how existing patterns of gender inequality, can be addressed.