



The Government Equalities Office

A Response to: “Strengthening Women’s Voices in Government” – A Consultation by the Government Equalities Office

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Core Work of Women's Aid: Background Information & Statistics

1.0 Introduction

Women's Aid is the lead voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland addressing domestic violence and providing services for women and children. We recognise domestic violence as one form of violence against women. Women's Aid seeks to challenge attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate domestic violence and, through our work, promote healthy and non-abusive relationships.

2.0 Core Work of Women's Aid

The core work of Women's Aid in Northern Ireland, including Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland and the 10 local Women's Aid groups is:

- To provide refuge accommodation to women and their children suffering mental, physical or sexual abuse within the home.
- To run the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline.
- To provide a range of support services to enable women who are leaving a violent situation to rebuild their lives and the lives of their children.
- To provide a range of support services to children and young people who have experienced domestic violence.
- To run preventative education programmes in schools and other settings.
- To educate and inform the public, media, police, courts, social services and other agencies of the impact and effects of domestic violence.
- To advise and support all relevant agencies in the development of domestic violence policies, protocols and service delivery.
- To work in partnership with all relevant agencies to ensure a joined up response to domestic violence.

3.0 Women's Aid Statistics (2009 - 2010)

- 12 refuges with 300 bed spaces, playrooms and facilities.
- 1077 women and 854 children sought refuge.
- 15 resource centres for women seeking information and support; group work and training.
- 2,938 women and 3,617 children accessed the Floating Support service enabling women to access support whilst remaining in their own homes and communities.
- Move-on houses for women and children leaving refuges.
- In 2009/10 the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline, open to anyone affected by domestic violence, managed 32,349 calls. This represented an increase of 17% on 2008/09.

4.0 Additional Women's Aid Statistical Data

- Since 1999, Women's Aid across Northern Ireland gave refuge to 13,656 women and 13,602 children and young people.
- During the last 15 years Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland managed 244,564 calls to the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline.

5.0 Statistics: Domestic Violence & Violence Against Women

- Domestic violence is a violation of Article 5 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights – that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”;
- The joint NIO, DHSSPS Strategy “Tackling Violence at Home” estimates that the cost of domestic violence in Northern Ireland, including the potential loss of economic output, could amount to £180 million each year.
- UNICEF research released in 2006, showing per capita incidence, indicates that there are up to 32,000 children and young people living with domestic violence in Northern Ireland.
- Where the gender of the victim was known, 75% of adult victims of domestic crimes recorded by the PSNI in 2009/10 were female.*
- Over 30% of all domestic violence starts during pregnancy. **

6.0 Domestic Violence: Crime Statistics

- Domestic Violence is a crime. PSNI statistics for 2010/11 indicate that there were more recorded crimes with a domestic motivation (9,546) than the combined total of all the following crimes (9,471). These include all recorded sexual offences (2,120), robbery (622), armed robbery (562), hijacking (122), theft or unauthorised taking of a motor vehicle (2719), arson (1884) dangerous driving (699), handling stolen goods (194) and offences under anti-terrorism legislation (19).
- PSNI Statistics for 10/11 indicate that they responded to a domestic incident every 23 minutes of every day of the year.
- The total of 9,546 crimes with a domestic motivation in 10/11 represents an average of approximately 1 domestic crime every 60 minutes in Northern Ireland.
- The number of all recorded offences of murder in Northern Ireland in 10/11 total 20. Those classed as having a domestic motivation total 7. Therefore, 35% of all murders in Northern Ireland in 10/11 had a domestic motivation.
- There were 550 rapes (including attempted Rapes) in Northern Ireland in the period 2010/11.

(Source: PSNI Statistics 2010/11)

- Official sources (NISOSMC) estimate that up to 80% of sex crimes are not reported.
- Violence Against Women is not limited to domestic violence, it includes amongst other crimes murder, rape, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, trafficking, sexual stalking and sexual harassment.

(*Findings from the PSNI Crime Statistics Report 2010/11 N.B. "Adult" defined as aged 18 and over)

(** Women's Aid Federation NI)

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1. Introduction

Women's Aid Federation NI welcomes the publication of the Government Equalities Office consultation on Strengthening Women's Voices in Government and the opportunity to comment upon the document on behalf of our ten local groups. The following comments reflect their collective views.

We would wish to preface our comments by stating our disappointment with the format of the consultation. It is our view that the survey does not allow for detailed responses and does not make it clear that organisations and individuals can respond in different ways.

Women's Aid shares the view of the Women's Resource Centre (WRC), that 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 and diversity of women's experiences. We ask that future engagement also acknowledges intersectionality, which is a key issue that the consultation appears to have overlooked.

Our organisation also concurs with the Northern Ireland European Women's Platform (NIWEP), that in developing a new UK gender architecture the Government should not underestimate the challenges to be faced which includes the need to capture diversity and not to seek a common denominator.

We also agree that the general experience for women in Northern Ireland has been one of being on the peripheral and of being marginalised by Whitehall and Westminster. There has been little attention paid to facilitating their inclusion.

We further share the view expressed by NIWEP that the stronger inclusive new gender architecture should ensure that issues that are critical elsewhere are included in the UK agenda. For example for women in Northern Ireland the unfair treatment compared to the rest of the UK when it comes to reproductive health and rights or that Northern Ireland now lags behind equality legislation in the UK since the passage of the Equality Act 2010.

The Act affords much greater provisions in respect of addressing equal pay and the extension of positive action measures. Women's Aid joins with the Women's Centre's Regional Partnership (WCRP) in highlighting the need for Government to immediately implement United Nations Resolution 1325 and ensure that the principles held in the resolution are embedded in any local government reform. In particular, ¹“Reaffirming the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace building and stressing the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution”. Similarly UN 1325 reaffirms, “the need to implement fully international humanitarian and human rights law that protects the rights of women and girls during and after conflicts.”²

¹ http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf

² Ibid.

Whilst we join with NIWEP in welcoming the progress, participation and access afforded by devolved Government, we feel that it is important to recognise that there are many Government responsibilities which still remain driven by Westminster 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 only in England and Wales

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

- marginalisation 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. A National Machinery on Women

In taking on board at a local level the inclusion of women in Northern Ireland and at a national level, the impact on the abolishment of the WNC the principles of any national machinery should:

- channel the voice of women to government
- all nations of the UK should be involved in developing options

- include / be representative of all four nations equally
- channel between the nations collectively and at Westminster
- be capable of coping with diversity
- be about application of gender equality in all nations
- resource the UK infrastructure
- resource the four nation process
- Ensure each nation has a role in deciding upon representation
- strengthen link with politicians in all parties and all officials with responsibility for gender equality

3. Developing a WNC Model

Women's National Commission

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. The decision removed a body which had been pro-active in affording and facilitating the opportunity for Women's Groups and Organisations in Northern Ireland, including Women's Aid, to network with colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales, to compare experiences and to contribute on key areas of concern including the area of violence against women.

It is therefore our strong opinion that any new structure should 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

4. Strengthening Existing Models

UK Joint Committee on Women

Women's Aid would wish to highlight the key role that NIWEP, NAWO, Engender (Scotland) and Women in Wales play as partners in the UK Joint Committee on Women (UKJCW). The main aim of the Committee is to represent NGOs in the UK at the European Women's Lobby (EWL), taking it in turn to be nominated to the EWL Board.

UK Groups / Organisations with Consultative Status

There are many women's organisations across the UK which have direct access to the UN Economic and Social Council by holding consultative status. These organisations bring expertise of the key issues impacting on women in

the UK who lobby, report and monitor the UK government in its international negotiations and its impact on women in the UK.

It is vital that any new system fully recognises those groups and organisations who work internationally and those who work to impact on the women in the UK.

5. Effective Engagement - Direct Engagement, Bringing in Expertise and IT Platform

Direct Engagement:

Women's Aid notes the recognition contained in the consultation document (2.2, 21, pg. 12) that "Good Government should always ensure that Ministers have direct engagement with individuals and organisations that are affected by their policies" and that to this end, "We will develop a programme of outreach, meetings and events to provide opportunities for Ministers to listen to your views on the key challenges or priorities for women today." Our organisation would seek further clarification on this issue and in particular what structures will be put in place to ensure that this direct communication is extended to women in Northern Ireland in a meaningful manner.

Bringing In Expertise

In the context of bringing in expertise (2.3, Pg.13) our organisation agrees it is vital for Government to utilise the invaluable insight and knowledge of women's organisations and community groups to inform the decision and policy making process. However, we support the views expressed by the WCRP, specifically that the importance of funding and buying in of this expertise from the sector should be recognised, particularly in the context of a sector in Northern Ireland which is facing a crisis in funding.

We would also seek greater detail in respect of the composition of the "expert panels" designed to support government to develop policy in particular areas. (Pg.13) Similarly in respect of the commissioning process stated on page 14, we would seek clarification on the tendering process, how this will be

publicised, whether the process will be open to the private sector and if so, will contracts with private sector businesses include a social clause in the contract?

IT Platform

Whilst we agree that a comprehensive interactive IT platform would be useful as a consultation mechanism to consult on policy matters we would be extremely wary of substituting this one tool for a more inclusive, engaged consultation process. The resources that would be required to keep this live and up to date might be better spent in more direct engagement.

Women's Aid is of the opinion that participation and policy consultation will not be successful, especially in reaching more marginal groups and individuals, if this is the sole or main means by which consultation and information is undertaken and care must be taken to ensure that UK wide information and consultation is done effectively across and within the different nations and regions of the UK. To this end we would join with WCRP in highlighting the digital divide which continues to exist in Northern Ireland and drawing attention to research carried out by the Digital Inclusion Unit within the Department of Finance and Personnel³ which indicated that 43% of the population do not make use of the internet. The paper further highlighted specific groups within society who felt particularly disconnected from the "information society" including over 91% of those aged 65 and over, 70% of people with disabilities and 64% of those in the lower socio-economic groups. There are also particular difficulties for those in rural communities in Northern Ireland some of whom have no access to broadband services.

We would support NIWEP in contending that Government should not be seen to provide a channel of communication for women to hear their voices based on the cheapest or easiest method, it should be based on the most effective. Government should not be seen to be favouring particular groups and

³ Digital Inclusion Strategy – http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/digital_inclusion_strategy_2003-2.pdf

organisations who may have the resources but not the experience in shaping policy for women at local, national, European and international level.

6. Priority Issues

As requested in the consultation document the priority issues for Women's Aid are:

- Eradicating Violence Against Women
- Addressing the plight of Women with No Recourse to Public Funds
- Eliminating the trade in Human Trafficking
- Economics – (pay gap, childcare, older women's poverty, pensions)
- Increasing women's representation in Decision Making

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7. Model of Engaging Effectively with Women of the UK

Level	The Sector	Action by Governments	Outcome
Devolved Nations	Each to establish a flat structure of collaborative groups to meet 4 times a year and to feed into the development of regional government policy and provide the representative of the UK Joint Committee with key issues impacting on local women (e.g. NI the Ad Hoc Policy Group)	<p>Devolved governments to raise awareness across government departments of the establishment of these groups</p> <p>Devolved governments and officials to meet up to 4 times per year with the collaborative groups to identify the key priorities</p> <p>Officials to meet regularly with their counterparts and to consider effective actions cross departmental to address the priorities</p>	A mechanism which will provide collective input and access to the development and scrutiny of all policies and the development of legislation on an equal level for women across the UK
UK	UK Joint Committee as part of the collaborative group and to meet 4 times per year to share key issues and concerns and to develop collective key priorities and identify differences at a regional level	To provide the resources to develop a communication strategy for the UK JCW which will enable them to meet, share, inform and report to the sector, the government and the EWL	A mechanism which will ensure a collective UK communications strategy at a regional, national and European level
European	UKJCW continue in the role of representatives to the European Women's Lobby and as part of the communications strategy develops ways to meet, share, inform and report to the sector, the government and the EWL	See above	A mechanism which will give UK women a collective voice in Europe as well as bring the voice of Europe to women in the UK
International	Those with UN Consultative Status whose membership includes specialist groups to	Government to provide the resources to give the space for the sector to discuss	A mechanism which will provide a plan to engage with expertise

Level	The Sector	Action by Governments	Outcome
	<p>provide key information on thematic issues and whose focus is on women in the UK to meet to discuss on a UK wide level the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Roles and responsibilities - Communication methods - Reporting mechanisms - Representation <p>Sector to consider how best to manage itself at international events such as CSW, reporting on CEDAW, attending CEDAW Beijing etc. Sector will report to government how best to communicate during such events</p>	<p>Government to provide a plan of how it intends to communicate effectively and in a timely manner with the sector across the UK on key international issues</p> <p>GEO to hold meetings before and after events and to ensure resources are available to include the four nations</p> <p>GEO to consider involving devolved officials and Ministers from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in international events such as CSW, European, Beijing</p> <p>Government will give space and time to meet with groups across the UK to develop a plan of how it will engage with NGOs at international events</p>	<p>groups and organisations in a inclusive approach to international issues impacting on UK women</p>