

## **NIWEP response to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for the Environment call for evidence on the Local Government Bill – November 2013**

The Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP) is an umbrella organisation that strives to maximise the effectiveness of international mechanisms in achieving equality between women and men in:

- safety and physical integrity;
- participation in public life
- access to services;
- economic security;
- social protection;
- quality of life.

NIWEP welcomes the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee on the Local Government Bill. We consider the framework for local government to be crucial to creating a society that is just and equal and deals with the inequalities faced by women.

Inequalities remain between women and men. Many women also experience a double jeopardy through their race, age, disability, caring responsibilities, sexual orientation or other factors. As an example women are already under represented in public life but there has been little done to deal with intersectionality and multiple identities such as the representation of minority ethnic women or disabled women to name a few.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> More information can be found in the NIWEP CEDAW shadow report July 2013

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/cedaws55.htm> Page 3

International standards and mechanisms refer to the need to include women in decision making roles. The Concluding Observations from the recent examination by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) of the UK Government in July 2013 state:

'Participation in political and public life. While noting the increase in the representation of women in the public sector, the Committee is concerned that women continue to be significantly underrepresented in certain fields, including in parliament, in the judiciary and on public sector boards. The Committee is particularly concerned at the low representation of black and minority ethnic women and women with disabilities in political life.

The Committee further recalls its previous concluding observations and remains concerned at the low representation of women in the post-conflict process in Northern Ireland and the failure to fully implement Security Council Resolution 1325. The Committee calls upon the State party:

- (a) Continue to take concrete targeted measures to improve the representation of women in Parliament and the judiciary, particularly black and ethnic minority women and women with disabilities; and
- (b) Ensure the participation of women in the post-conflict process in Northern Ireland, in line with Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000)<sup>2</sup>

As mentioned, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 Women, Peace and Security requires participation of women as a key measure in peace building. Lynn Featherstone, in a response to a Parliamentary Question stated:

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<sup>2</sup> CEDAW Concluding Observations of the UK July 2013 can be accessed at <http://www.wrda.net/CEDAW-Concluding-comments-2013.aspx>

'UNSCR 1325 makes provision for the protection of women in armed conflicts and to encourage their participation in conflict resolution and political and public life. Some aspects of UNSCR 1325 such as participation in peace and political processes are relevant to all states and the Government will continue to work towards increasing the representation of women in Northern Ireland in public and political life.'<sup>3</sup>

This statement was directly echoed in Government's 7<sup>th</sup> Periodic report to CEDAW in June 2011.

NIWEP's main concern in completion of the Review of Public Administration is that women are fully represented in decision making and structures<sup>4</sup>. This is not currently the case. The Transition Committees have seen a diminution of women's participation<sup>5</sup>. This underlines the fact that it is necessary to take positive action to ensure gendered perspectives in the process<sup>6</sup>.

An excellent model of such positive measures is the 'Women into Local Councils' initiative<sup>7</sup> which works to increase participation of women at both elected member and officer level. NIWEP is concerned that this work may be neglected if the Minister's recommendation to dissolve the Local Government Staff Commission is agreed.

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<sup>3</sup> 18 Official report (Hansard) 13 Mar 2012: Column 205W, Minister for Women and Equalities, Lynn Featherstone MP [available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201212/cmhansrd/cm120313/text/120313w0003.htm#120314> 100122 8 accessed June 2013

<sup>4</sup> Hinds, B and Loughlin, J (Nov 2005) The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland: Checks, Balances and Safeguards can be accessed at [www.doeni.gov.uk/lqrt\\_gov\\_checks\\_balances\\_safeguards.pdf](http://www.doeni.gov.uk/lqrt_gov_checks_balances_safeguards.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Hinds, B and Gray, AM (Nov 2005) Women and the Review of Public Administration can be found at <http://www.archive.rpani.gov.uk/Women%20and%20the%20RPA.pdf> or incorporated within [www.equalityni.org/archive/event\\_resources/BHinds.doc](http://www.equalityni.org/archive/event_resources/BHinds.doc)

<sup>6</sup> Response to consultation on Transition Committees, 2009 – NIWEP, NIC-ICTU, DemocraShe

<sup>7</sup> More information can be found at <http://www.lgsc.org.uk/new-initiatives/equality-and-diversity/>

More women in decision making roles such as the transition committees would be beneficial for all citizens (see postscript). It would bring a broader range of skills, experience and talent to policy making, would ensure a greater focus on addressing gender equality issues and on how social policy or the absence of policy impacts on women (which has been very absent from policy making in Northern Ireland over the years), and would contribute to changing the culture of politics in Northern Ireland.

We welcome the fact that completion of RPA takes place parallel with the revision of the Gender Equality Strategy and the development of related action plans and view this as an opportunity to implement measures for the inclusion of women in decision making<sup>8</sup>.

NIWEP welcomes the following elements of the Bill:

- **Code of Conduct:** we support the development of a code of conduct in local government;
- **community planning:** we look forward to community planning measures that are fully inclusive and informed by engagement with all areas of the community;
- **general power of competence:** we support a general power of competence where it allow innovative approaches to problem solving and to meeting the needs of communities;
- **Partnership Panel:** we welcome steps taken to harmonise the vision and strategy at central and local levels.

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<sup>8</sup> Hinds, B and Loughlin, J (Nov 2005) The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland: Checks, Balances and Safeguards can be accessed at [www.doeni.gov.uk/lgrt\\_gov\\_checks\\_balances\\_safeguards.pdf](http://www.doeni.gov.uk/lgrt_gov_checks_balances_safeguards.pdf)

In respect of the wider context, it was the previous Minister's intention to take legal opinion on quotas, as he informed NIWEP at a meeting that also included DemocraShe and WRDA in 2012. The Minister at this time was extremely interested in addressing the gender deficit and we would be interested to know if the Committee have considered this matter.

We look forward to contributing further on the completion stages of the RPA and would be willing to give oral evidence to the Committee in line with this submission.



**Kate McCullough**  
Chairwoman NIWEP

## POSTSCRIPT ON WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING

Decision making and policy development should be informed by both women and men. Structures and representation should reflect society. This will not happen of its own accord but will require a gender sensitive approach. Such an approach will be developed through assessing equality in all measures. It will include:

- **gender mainstreaming:** consideration of gender issues in all policy and decision making – the Gender Equality Strategy offers a framework for this;
- **positive action:** recognition that achieving women's equality will require specific actions – the diminished representation of women on the temporary Transition Committees demonstrates this and consideration can be given to relevant actions in the Section 75 action plans now being developed;
- **gender budgeting:** using gender budgeting mechanisms to ensure public money is most effectively spent will meet the challenges of public spending in the economic downturn;
- **gender impact assessment:** assessment, strategising including setting timescales, monitoring and review – the Gender Equality Action Plans, including the cross departmental commitment to developing data for women and men will support this.