



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR THE OFFICE OF THE
FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY
FIRST MINISTER**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Gender Equality Strategy

23 September 2009

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Danny Kennedy (Chairperson)
Mrs Naomi Long (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jim Shannon
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Dr Gerry Mulligan)	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Ms Eileen Sung)	
Ms Patricia Haren)	Gender Advisory Panel
Ms Bronagh Hinds)	
Mr Michael Lynch)	
Ms Margaret Ward)	

The Chairperson (Mr Kennedy):

Gerry Mulligan and Eileen Sung from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) are here to brief the Committee, and representatives of the Gender Advisory Panel will discuss the gender equality strategy. You are all very welcome, and we appreciate your attendance. After your opening statement, members will want to ask questions. We anticipate

that the session will last approximately half an hour, including 10 minutes for your presentation.

Dr Gerry Mulligan (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

Thank you. I understand that the views of the Department's advisory panel are the focus of today's meeting and that the Committee will want to devote most of the time that is available to the members of that panel. Therefore, I will keep my opening remarks as brief as possible. Thank you for inviting the Department's Gender Advisory Panel to address the Committee.

I will introduce those who will be appearing before you. You have met Eileen Sung before, and she heads the gender unit in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The four representatives of the advisory panel are: Bronagh Hinds from the Women's National Commission; Margaret Ward from the Women's Research and Development Agency; Patricia Haren from the Women's Support Network; and Michael Lynch from the Men's Action Network. On behalf of the Ministers, I thank all four for being prepared to address the Committee. It is a daunting task, particularly for those who have no experience of Committee appearances.

The Chairperson:

You have had plenty of experience, Gerry. It does not seem to daunt you.

Dr Mulligan:

Thank you. I will talk briefly about the background to our work with the Gender Advisory Panel. Our work pre-dates the restoration of the Assembly, and the panel helped us to develop the gender equality strategy at the very outset. The most significant date in that work was January 2008, which was when the Programme for Government was published. That document included the commitment to implement the gender equality strategy that existed at that time. We re-activated and galvanised the work of the panel at that stage. In April 2008, we recommended that the Ministers adopt formally fresh terms of reference and renew the membership of the panel.

The panel's terms of reference specifically require it to:

“advise and assist in the development and monitoring of cross-departmental gender equality action plans for women and men, to deliver the Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2006-2016.”

The panel has been helpful in a number of areas, including giving advice on strategy. It has helped us to develop baseline indicators against which we can monitor the success of the strategy, and it helped us to develop questions that will be used in an omnibus survey about specific gender

issues. Therefore, we have had a very constructive working relationship. The panel has been at times critical, but often constructive, and we are very appreciative of that.

On 11 September 2009, junior Minister Newton met members of the panel, which was another opportunity for them to put to him some of the concerns that they expressed in their paper to him. He is now aware of the sorts of areas on which the panel has touched.

The Committee asked for a short paper, and, again, I am grateful to the panel for having brought its ideas together so clearly. I understand that the Committee will want to talk to the panel about that paper. Therefore, to leave as much time as possible for the Committee to do so, I propose that I say no more, unless there are specific questions at this stage. However, I am happy to return after you have had a chance to talk to the panel.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. I invite representatives from the Gender Advisory Panel — Bronagh Hinds, Michael Lynch, Patricia Haren and Margaret Ward — to speak to the Committee. Thank you for coming to represent the wider panel. Unfortunately, for practical reasons it was not possible to include as many panel members as you would have wished. Nevertheless, the Committee is confident that you will reflect the views of the team ably and adequately. I invite you to make a presentation, after which members may ask questions. The proceedings are being recorded for Hansard.

Ms Bronagh Hinds (Gender Advisory Panel):

Thank you. I will give a short introduction, each panel member will introduce themselves in turn, and I will conclude the discussion. Each member will speak for about two minutes, because although we have half an hour, we want to give Committee members the greatest possible opportunity to engage in a dialogue with us.

The Chairperson:

That is very helpful.

Ms Hinds:

I am from the Women's National Commission, but we are all here representing the women's and men's sector, as well as the Gender Advisory Panel, which works closely with OFMDFM. You

alluded to our disappointment; we thought that we were going to get most of the Committee's time and have an extensive discussion, so I want to put on record the disappointment of the women's sector. We hope that we can come back and do this again.

The Chairperson:

The Committee is very pleased that you have taken the time and the opportunity to appear before us. You will, of course, realise that we have other responsibilities to which to attend. However, the Committee is very willing to receive additional information after this briefing. We do not see this encounter as the end.

Ms Hinds:

Thank you; we will be seeking an ongoing relationship with the Committee. In their work on the Gender Advisory Panel, the women's and men's groups work and complement each other and do not see each other in competition. Indeed, we have a very good working relationship.

All members of the Gender Advisory Panel agree on two fundamental points. The panel is extremely concerned with the process that has been adopted for dealing with equality issues, particularly gender. That approach is termed "gender neutral", and it seeks to develop an equal-treatment approach, rather than to address specifically the women's and men's sectors or to identify the needs, gaps, and under-representation that are experienced in both. The approach should also deal with the key issues in each sector; if it did, we could arrive at equality of outcome, which would mean that everyone is on a level playing field.

The panel feels that the departmental gender equality action plans must pay much greater attention to gender analysis by using disaggregated statistics that cover a range of equality grounds. It is only through the use of such statistics that gender proofing can be carried out, and the panel feels that that must be included in the Programme for Government so that an understanding of budgeting and gender budgeting can be arrived at. That is relevant, as it will inform our priorities and will show us the areas, such as childcare, in which we must invest. However, childcare has been on the agenda since 1976, but we have not moved very far on it. Indeed, we actually have the worst childcare provision in Europe.

Those are some of the reasons why we must adopt a more extensive approach. I now ask Margaret Ward to say a few words.

Ms Margaret Ward (Gender Advisory Panel):

Thank you. I am the director of the Women's Resource and Development Agency, and my points will reflect the views of the panel generally and the discussions that it has had on the subject. First, I will talk briefly about the process of engagement between the Gender Advisory Panel and OFMDFM in examining the departmental gender equality action plans and the gender equality strategy.

The Gender Advisory Panel first convened four years ago this month, and I have been a member of it since then. It was a long time before the panel decided on a gender equality strategy that we felt was robust enough. Following the creation of that strategy, the panel has been examining departmental gender equality action plans.

From the beginning, the panel has requested opportunities to speak with representatives of each Department. That was to ensure that the departmental gender equality action plans did more than simply map what Departments were doing; we wanted to ensure that they were proactive and took on board the expertise of the different groups that were represented on the panel.

Annie Campbell from Women's Aid is unable to attend today, but she wanted me to make the point on her behalf that a very good model for a similar type of engagement exists already with Women's Aid, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the NIO in their examination of the various strategies to combat violence against women. Annie has also told me that since those bodies began meeting, the policies are evidence based and have developed much more robustly. We would, therefore, like to see such an opportunity develop with the panel.

The panel is aware that the gender equality action plan is cross departmental. However, the panel feels that it would be very helpful if each Department provided information separately to it on what they are doing. If that were possible, it would be easier to demonstrate that some of the work that individual Departments are doing on gender equality is extremely thin on the ground. For example, the Department of the Environment (DOE), which is the Department that is responsible for driving forward the review of public administration (RPA), makes only one mention of gender equality, stating that it will enhance its own awareness of gender issues. Furthermore, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) made no return in the

departmental action plans, and that point got lost, because we are examining all the Departments together. DRD deals with transport, which is a huge barrier for women. Therefore, that Department's approach to gender equality should be included in the action plan, and the panel would encourage that Department's participation.

A further area of concern for the panel is that women's multi-identities are still not reflected in the departmental action plans. That was a very big issue in the consultation on the gender equality strategy. The initial consultation was on transgender issues, and the first version of the strategy did not examine different groups of women such as older women, ethnic minority women, lesbian women etc; it simply considered women and men. The strategy was changed finally as a result of the large volume of consultation responses, yet that has not been reflected in the action plans. That is a serious deficiency.

We want something that contains targets and has robust outcomes on which we can work together. We know that the Committee has already been talking about that, so the panel wishes to encourage its efforts.

Mr Michael Lynch (Gender Advisory Panel):

I endorse what Margaret Ward said.

I represent the men's sector. We looked at the action plans from the perspective of men, and we found that references to men's issues and specific targets were sparse.

Although the men's sector is burgeoning, there is no co-ordinated body for it or any advocacy or project workers in it. Things are left to a few individuals who, in effect, try to collate men's issues as they see them, such as those that affect health or education. For instance, many boys leave school with little or no qualifications and do not return to education. Boys and men are the most likely people to become involved in crime. Consequently, they make up most of the prison population. From the health perspective, men often make bad lifestyle choices and do not engage with GPs and health professionals. Consequently, their health is at risk, particularly from preventable diseases, which are often only diagnosed when it is too late. In addition, we all know that men are several times more likely to take their own life. Such health factors mean that, in general, men live for five years less than their female counterparts. Often, Departments engage with young men only when they are in trouble or seen as being troublesome. We want much

more work to be done in the field of education to support young men's overall development.

Ms Patricia Haren (Gender Advisory Panel):

I am the director of the Women's Support Network. I will concentrate on two areas, the first of which is childcare. Our research shows that childcare constantly comes up as being a main barrier to women going back to work, so we are waiting to see what is in the childcare strategy.

Although I am sure that this is information that the Committee already knows, I remind you that Northern Ireland has the lowest childcare provision in Europe, even for lone parents. For example, Gingerbread states that only eight childcare places are available for every 1,000 people. I could blind you with childcare statistics, for there are plenty out there, but I will not.

As well as the lack of childcare provision's being a barrier to women gaining employment, it remains a significant barrier to them retaining employment. Once women have children, in order to stay in employment, they must find suitable childcare places that are affordable and close to where they work. That is common to all women, whatever they are trying to achieve.

We are often told that there are plenty of women in training and education, but plenty of women are not. Again, the lack of childcare is one of the main barriers that we find, especially for women who have to return to education after having children. We need more courses, especially ones to attract women on low incomes and with a low skill set, and they must be at a cost that they can afford.

I can point out other indicators. For example, there is a low female number of public appointments. Once again, childcare is an issue. Many public appointment meetings are at teatime, so who will mind their children? Moreover, let us not forget unmarried women.

In spite of the efforts of the Department for Employment and Learning and the further education sector to attract women, they are still under-represented in the non-traditional skills sector. One barrier is finding appropriate placements for women. At the end of the day, a cultural change is required.

I do not want to waste too much time, because I am sure that Committee members will want to ask questions.

Ms Hinds:

Women across the sectors, those in the women's sector and women politicians have identified the issue of women in politics and public life as a key priority area. I will first discuss the review of public administration (RPA) and local government reform. I do not want to blind members with statistics. However, here are some numbers: no women are on the transition committees in Omagh and Fermanagh; they make up 6% in Down and Newry and Mourne; 7% in Dungannon, Cookstown and Magherafelt; and 6% in Castlereagh and Lisburn. Derry and Strabane are best represented with 38%. The women's sector, women politicians and the Women in Local Councils — Making a Difference initiative are concerned about the participation of women in the RPA.

The Minister of the Environment conducted a consultation exercise on the transition committees. It may surprise the Committee to know that 12 women's organisations made submissions, some of which were combined, about the composition of transition committees. They have yet to receive a response on the gender issues in the local government reform process. We suggest that this Committee raise that issue in discussions with the Committee for the Environment. We need to gender-proof the legislation, policies, preparation and structures for the transition for local government. Moreover, we want to encourage individual parties to consider how to have more women in local government post-2011.

That is linked to the critical issue of women in public appointments. Between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s, the number of women in public appointments decreased by 3% to 32% and the number of female chairpersons of public bodies decreased by 5% to 25%. That is a major issue. I spoke to the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland yesterday. Another problem is that so many local councils appoint to public appointments. The fact that there are fewer women in local government impacts on the number of women in public appointments. In any event, we need to recruit more women to public bodies and appoint more women as chairpersons of senior public bodies rather than merely focus on, for example, the health and social care field.

Next year is the anniversary of UN Security Council resolution 1325, which concerns countries in conflict and those that are making the transition from conflict, of which we are one. It is about the role of women, and it covers violence against women and women's political

participation. At a conference during the summer, I said that women in all sectors considered the issue of local government reform to be the number one project for resolution 1325. OFMDFM and the Northern Ireland Office need to engage to put resolution 1325 on this agenda and on the international agenda. We must engage with the UK Government on the issue, because they have a national action plan on resolution 1325, which we want to mention Northern Ireland. Furthermore, we want OFMDFM to develop an action plan for resolution 1325, and we suggest that it engage with the Republic of Ireland about its national action plan.

Finally, I draw your attention to the requests at the end of the document for there to be a gender-equality impact assessment of the local government reform process. That is urgent; we will lose that opportunity if we do not move now. The Gender Advisory Panel must increase engagement with Departments to help them to develop appropriate gender actions plans, which will include issues such as the need for gender budgeting; the need for support for childcare and lifelong learning; and the need for childcare that supports full-time education and training and full-time and part-time work.

We would like you to engage with other Committees, particularly the Committee for the Environment at this point, on the agenda issues that each should adopt. We look forward to further engagement and to a sustained relationship. Our partners in the women's and men's sectors can also appear before the Committee.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for making such clear presentations; I greatly appreciate that. Several members will have questions for you.

It is sometimes my role as Chairperson to ask the difficult questions, but that is why you are here. Gender equality is a serious topic, and one that we want to take seriously. This may sound defensive, particularly coming from a male Chairperson, but it is not intended to be: has any work been done to assess the potential cost of rolling out the changes that you advocate and envisage?

Does your strategy recommend reverse, or positive, gender discrimination? How could that be implemented to improve the situation?

Ms Hinds:

As part of attempts to rebalance the gender imbalance in the political arena, the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002, which applies in England and Northern Ireland, allows political parties to take whatever measures they feel comfortable with to promote women. Its aim is to tackle under-representation. Therefore, we suggest that the political parties take stock of their current composition and consider what specific positive action can be taken to address any under-represented groups, including minority ethnic groups, as well as women, and so forth.

Secondly, I refer members to the code of practice of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. Both ways in which to make public appointments are based on merit. The first is to put suggestions to the Minister in rank order, and the second is to establish a pass mark and identify the candidates who attain it. If we were to take the second option, it would be possible not only to consider the rank order but to take into account the various gaps that need to be filled. That would, therefore, be a positive action measure, but it would also be based on merit. My colleagues may have something to add.

Ms Haren:

From an education point of view, I am not looking so much for positive discrimination as for equality of opportunity. The main barrier to anyone's accessing education must be examined. We talked about the cost of childcare. If the Government enable women to return to work, they are removing them from so-called economic inactivity and will, therefore, get back what they put in. Let us be clear that there could be a cost up front, but the result is that women stay in education.

We provide training, particularly professional training, for many women, including doctors, lawyers, and so forth. They must be provided with suitable childcare, and that is particularly important for women doctors, who work unsocial hours. Otherwise, we must face the fact that many women will choose to become GPs, because of the flexible hours. You asked about cost, but there is no simple answer, because other factors must be considered.

The Chairperson:

Speaking not as Chairperson but as a member of a political party in the Assembly, I must say that it is of deep concern and disappointment to the Ulster Unionist Party that it has no female MLAs.

Lest that become the focus of anyone's attention, let me assure you that the party is actively working to address that situation.

Ms Hinds:

May I respond to your question about the potential cost of change?

You are asking a sector that is generally under-resourced. However, the question that you are asking is exactly the question that we are asking about how the Programme for Government sets its priorities and budgets. We would be only too delighted to agree with you that we need to look at how the priorities are set and the potential cost of doing one priority over another. That is exactly what we are asking when we ask for a proper analysis and for a gender-budgeting approach to be taken. Therefore, we would be very happy to have the Government adopt that approach.

Ms Anderson:

Thank you for the presentation. I concur with all that you said, and your submission paper is very interesting. Prior to your giving evidence, two departmental officials said that the baseline indicators to monitor the strategy were helpful. How helpful is the strategy? Is the strategy's gender-neutral approach appropriate, given that the promotion of equality of opportunity is not just the intent of section 75 but the law? We either implement the law or we do not.

I am concerned about officials' approach to section 75, which, in so far as I have experienced on the Committee through engaging with officials and from reading documentation, has tended to be about avoiding doing the bad but not promoting doing the good. It is almost like the adverse impact. We have an action plan for a strategy — a strategy in which I do not have a great deal of faith to bring about the required outcomes. I am concerned that we are tweaking action plans for a strategy that is flawed in the first instance.

Ms Ward:

The strategy is not the most robust strategy, but it is a considerable improvement on its first drafts. We agreed that there were overriding priorities in that strategy, such as, for example, the elimination of gender-based violence and increased representation of women. We are now finding that the departmental action plans do not reflect the fact that we have overarching strategies, and the action plans are not taking into account how those can be met. The problem is

not with the strategy but with how it has been rolled out in the Departments concerned. Moreover, other Departments are making very little reference to the strategy.

However, the strategy talks more than equality of opportunity; it is concerned with equality of outcomes, and that is what is important. One can say that the Ritz Hotel is open to everyone as an equality of opportunity, but we know that the equality of outcome is that most people cannot afford to go there. The sort of barriers that we want to see removed are childcare, accessibility to services and the lack of representation in political and public life, so policies that would be of specific interest to women are not being reflected. The strategy can be gender-specific, but the roll-out of the action plans is gender-neutral. Therefore, it is a misreading of the strategy.

Mr Lynch:

The men's sector is very much playing catch-up, and we were greatly helped in order to get included in the strategy. That is a first step in developing some of the issues. On the issue of gender neutrality, from a health perspective, for example, we all know that men do not go to GPs, and that has an adverse effect on them. Therefore, positive work needs to be done in that area, and, hopefully, that can be done through legislation.

Men look at section 75 from a different perspective. We look at it as if there is really only male and female, and beyond that we have the multiple layers of disadvantage, whether that be being single or from an ethnic background, and so forth. Therefore, it is about trying, particularly from the men's sector's point of view, to begin to identify those issues and have a forum in which to take them forward. For now, this is the forum. We find your comments helpful in that regard.

Mrs Long:

Thank you for your helpful presentation. It raised important issues that we have been tackling over the past couple of weeks on the need for targets and outcomes, rather than process and activity, to be measured. You can be doing very good things that are not achieving the desired outcomes. It is important to find a balance.

I want to raise a couple of points. There should be genuine equality of opportunity. That means that one cannot shy away from tackling barriers. Instead, one must be proactive in encouraging people. I oppose measures that engineer equality of outcome. To me, that interferes with due process. That is where my boundary lies.

I want to mention 'Children First: The Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy'. I recognise that a lack of childcare disproportionately affects women. However, I am concerned that, when it is framed as a gender-based issue, stereotypes are reinforced. It implies that women should be the primary carers, whereas it should simply recognise the fact that in the majority of cases they are. It also fails to be sensitive to men who are the primary carers in their family situation or who are lone parents. I am concerned about the language that we use about childcare. I do not wish to ignore the fact that women are disproportionately affected, but it should be a parental issue. We should change the associated language to encourage more men to get involved with their families. I want to hear your views on that.

The other issue that I want to raise is non-traditional sectors. I have never worked in a traditional sector, and I do not know what I done to the statistics by leaving engineering to go into politics. I had also to leave our transition committee in Belfast, so I am shamed there, too. Both of my jobs have been non-traditional.

The best way in which to encourage other young women to see the opportunities available in non-traditional sectors is to talk up the job. I loved being an engineer, and now I love being a politician. I have not experienced the kind of barriers about which I hear others talk. I have had positive experiences. Those need to be heard by those who are considering getting involved.

There is a risk that if we place too much emphasis on the potential barriers and hurdles that may have to be overcome, which may affect some people but not all, and we unduly emphasise them, we will put off many people who may otherwise give it a go and be successful. How do you get the balance right between lifting the barriers and not making them, and the discourse around them, obstacles to people's certification?

Ms Haren:

You are quite right. I do not disagree at all with what you have said. I emphasised that, much of the time, the difficulty is finding placements. We have spoken to young female plumbers and electricians. The culture of the workplace has been troublesome, so what they need is support and recognition, especially from employers.

We need that support, especially in careers advice. The action plans of both the Department

of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning mention that. We are dealing with stereotypes from childhood. Women will go down the retail route, the hairdressing route and the beauty route. That still exists whether one likes it or not. The male sector will say the same about primary-school teaching, and we can all cite statistics in support of that. We base our findings on the evidence of people who are experiencing difficulties at this time.

Moreover, our school system has a very academic bent to it. In an economic downturn, apprenticeships across the board are affected. It is something that we need to bring to the fore.

Ms Hinds:

Can I segment the issues that you have raised? On the one hand, when we talk about structural change and the barriers, we must have a discussion with those who are making the policies, taking the decisions and trying to bring that kind of change in how they open up to women, whether it be employers, the public sector or others. On the other, we need to be, as you say, talking jobs up to the people whom we want. We need to pull all those aspects together. We are about tackling two different things. As for childcare, we are delighted if people are talking about “parent” to mean men and women.

I know that more men are now involved in childcare. However, it is all about change, and we would love to see the Committee’s leading some kind of change and ensuring that the childcare strategy is not a bit of this for two hours and a bit of that for two hours but makes provision for working parents.

Mrs Long:

You referred to the academic bent in the education system. My background is civil engineering, and I know that there is a major gap in craft-level employment. Getting women into professional careers as architects and engineers is, in some ways, the easy part. By comparison, getting people into the craft and construction sectors is much more difficult. The level of support given, not to mention the culture of the workplace, is an issue. I am aware of the work that is being done in primary schools, where young engineers are going into primary schools to work with young children to confound the stereotypes without talking about them. Young women engineers going into classrooms of five-year-olds and talking about their jobs creates a better image in a child’s head, as opposed to their hearing the word “engineer”. That is all positive, but I agree that the structural stuff needs to be dealt with.

Ms Ward:

My daughter's friend is studying engineering at Queen's University, where she has had fantastic support academically, and the university is very pleased to have women. However, she had to go to Manchester this summer for a placement as none was available in Northern Ireland. Much work has been done on professional training, but big issues remain with the workplace.

Mr Attwood:

I was chuffed a few hours ago when I took one of my daughters to get her hair cut. However, I had to take along my other daughter, who is only five months old, and I had to feed her in the hairdressers. The hairdresser commented on the fact that a man was double-jobbing. That relates back to the childcare issue.

The Chairperson:

That will be one of the reasons that your party leader is giving up his job.

Ms Anderson:

One of many.

Mrs Long:

Look at what you have started.

Mr Attwood:

If that is the reason that he has given it up, it is a very good one, Chairperson — whatever you may think about other reasons.

Mr Spratt:

What about the deputy leader?

Mr Attwood:

I think that we should return to OFMDFM issues and the childcare strategy. We get warm words from the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the junior Ministers repeatedly. We were told that a major meeting took place on 9 June. We are living in a big vacuum, and we should be pursuing those issues.

I see the hand of the system and of officials in some of the issues that have been highlighted. Bronagh said that she is extremely concerned about the gender-neutral approach. If there is a legal obligation, and the Equality Commission says that a certain approach is to be taken, and that, as a guide to interpretation, Minister Murphy said what he did in the House of Commons, how is it that that has not been adopted by our system? Did Bronagh raise that issue with junior Minister Newton when she met him last week? According to officials, a meeting took place between the panel and junior Minister Newton. If there is such legal authority on what the approach should be, how is it that that is not the approach that is being adopted?

Ms Hinds:

We were talking about those issues last week, and the junior Minister came in at the end of the meeting. It was his first introduction. I will not suggest to the Committee that we went through the whole agenda of issues directly with the junior Minister. However, we are not trying to raise those issues here and not raise them with the Ministers in OFMDFM.

Mr Attwood:

I realise that. How do officials respond?

Ms Hinds:

Other than treating people equally, a culture has grown as a result of a lack of understanding in dealing with the base of the gap, the problem and the under-representation. We are trying to improve the situation so that people are on a level playing field. The most ridiculous thing to emerge concerned funding for women's aid refuges. At one point, it was said that the refuges could not be funded, because there would not be similar funding for men.

That issue has been raised in Britain as well as here. Therefore, a culture exists that needs to be addressed. I understand that the Equality Commission is, not before time, about to produce guidelines to say that a gender-neutral approach is not acceptable. Everybody stays where they are when a gender-neutral approach is adopted.

At the UN last year, OFMDFM participated in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The UK Government, including Northern Ireland, were criticised, particularly on the issue of gender neutrality, and they were told that they

need to aim for substantive equality. That might relate to the Chairman's point about positive action. Whatever way we look at it, that issue raises hairs for some people. We must consider people's positions, both men and women, and deal with the disadvantages that they face. We must put structures and strategies in place that will improve the situation and achieve outcomes. I know that the Committee wants to reach targets and achieve outcomes; that is what CEDAW means when it talks about substantive equality.

Although Britain has been ahead in dealing with equality issues until now, one element of the single equality Bill will tackle under-representation in a number of fields, including gender under-representation. We were promised our single equality Bill during the first Assembly mandate, but we do not have it yet. Therefore, we are as concerned as the Committee, and we need the Committee to press OFMDFM guidelines to ensure that other Departments do not adopt a gender-neutral approach and to encourage the Equality Commission to produce its guidelines as soon as possible.

Mr Attwood:

We might take that matter up. Given that the strategy is dated 2006-2016, how long have we been waiting for a gender action plan from the Department for Regional Development?

Ms Haren:

Two years.

Mr Attwood:

We should refer that to the Committee for Regional Development.

Ms Hinds:

I suggest that it also be referred to the Committee for the Environment, because we had to drag an action plan from that Department.

Ms Ward:

We are presented with certain amounts of documentation at each panel meeting. The problem is that we have to consider information at the same time as we discuss it. Therefore, we are quite often not aware of everything. Only now that we have the final version, as does the Committee, have we noticed the gaps. On previous occasions that we raised issues for departmental officials

to take back to individual Departments, it has been a bit like Chinese whispers; they attempt to convey our message, but we then see something that is not quite what we conveyed in the first place.

Ms Hinds:

Departments need to join up their work. The work that the Department of the Environment is doing on local government reform is the most important work on women's issues, yet that Department's equality branch was not linking that work to the gender action plan. That should be a detailed piece of work at this critical time.

Ms Haren:

As a panel, we requested that Departments present at our meetings so that we can ask questions about their action plans. That is perhaps another way to obtain further information.

Mr Attwood:

The consultation process suggested that the action plans identify different categories of women. How did that not get into the system?

Ms Ward:

We feel that the Department action plans are not referenced to the gender equality strategy. I do not know what level of officials work on those plans. I often feel that the people who deal with those matters do not have sufficient experience or background to deal with the issue. There is a lack of commitment in some Departments. That is why we call for the appointment of a gender champion in each Department who understands and has some expertise on the issues.

Ms Hinds:

The Committee might want to identify with us what it considers the high-level achievements should be, so that, at the end of this run, it can be ascertained whether anybody has noticed that anything had been done. The issue is to establish two or three key high-level objectives that ought to be achieved.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. That completes the Committee's questions, and I thank you for your presentation. I assume that you attempted to go via route 1 by going directly to the Department

of the Environment or the Committee for the Environment.

Ms Hinds:

Letters have been sent to the DOE, and some of us have had discussions with OFMDFM. We will have discussions with the Department of the Environment, and we will write to the Committee for the Environment. However, if the Chairperson would not mind, we think that this Committee, given its responsibility in this area, will also want to join this issue up and to talk to that Committee.

The Chairperson:

We have been attempting to do that, but we may wish to pursue the matter further. Thank you all for your participation and contribution; we look forward to seeing you again soon.

Dr Gerry Mulligan and Eileen Sung are still with us and are available should any member wish to raise queries with them. The Committee will receive a briefing from the Equality Commission on the gender equality strategy at next week's meeting. Therefore, it might be more beneficial for us to wait until then.

Ms Anderson:

If each Department has a division with an equality responsibility, and if OFMDFM has an overarching responsibility, we need to ensure that as well as this Committee having a connection with other Committees, officials have that relationship in Departments and that they are pushing the agenda and ensuring that the action plans match the strategy, as opposed to waiting until they come out the other end and then implementing a few strategies.

The Chairperson:

It might be helpful if Gerry and Eileen responded to that.

Dr Mulligan:

I am sorry, but I was not sure whether you wanted us back.

The Chairperson:

You are very welcome again. During the previous presentation and the question-and-answer session that followed, the effectiveness and efficiency of OFMDFM's overall responsibility for

cross-cutting and cross-departmental issues was raised. Are mechanisms in place to allow OFMDFM to monitor and to be updated on other Departments' work?

Dr Mulligan:

Yes. I chair a formal interdepartmental committee, the equality and social needs steering group. That brings together senior officials from Departments, and it is a forum for discussions on particular strategies and on what Departments are doing to implement them. That is one of a number of mechanisms.

In addition, meetings are held at ministerial level at which gender equality issues such as childcare are discussed. Two such committees are the ministerial subcommittee on children and the ministerial subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion. Those provide opportunities for cross-departmental co-ordination on those issues at official and ministerial level.

Mrs Long:

The transition committees and the formulation for the new local government arrangements was another important issue that was raised. It is clear that there are issues about the under-representation of women on those committees. There has been historical under-representation of women in local government. However, has that been looked at as part of the RPA process? Has anyone engaged on that issue to ensure, for example, that how the structures of local government will work will have an impact on any plans to try to increase female representation? Has anyone ascertained how that can be monitored or achieved? Is any thought going into that process? It seemed to me that it was a fairly valid concern. Whenever new institutions are formed, you would want to hear not only the voice of people who are represented, but those of people who are not currently represented or heard. The desire is to make the new institutions more inclusive.

Dr Mulligan:

The transition committees understand specifically and reflect the make-up of the district councils. We have not raised your point formally with Departments, but in the light of the advisory panel's point, and in the context of this work, we will raise it with the relevant Department. I cannot say that we have taken up this issue as yet, but in the light of your comment, we certainly will.

Ms Anderson:

I am somewhat confused about your earlier points about the poverty and social inclusion

subcommittee. We have senior civil servants coming together who have a responsibility for this area of work, and a strategy is in place for dealing with that. However, they have produced a gender-neutral action plan that does not reflect the substance of the strategy. As civil servants, they have a statutory responsibility for and a legal authority to deal with the approach to section 75 and to promote equality of opportunity. You are the chairperson of that committee. Why was the action plan accepted? It should be returned to those civil servants and should not be allowed to get to the production stage. I know that there are developmental stages to each process. However, what kind of authority or engagement, if any, do you have with people who are producing an action plan that does not meet the strategy's implementation needs or ensure that its outcomes are delivered effectively?

Dr Mulligan:

We have a gate-keeping role in all strategies that the Executive agree. Therefore, on behalf of the Executive, we want to ensure that actions to implement the strategy are appropriate and fit for purpose. We could go back to Departments and Ministers and say that certain actions are not relevant, appropriate or strong enough. That is a constant challenge for us.

The Executive have not yet agreed this implementation plan; that is the next stage in the process. We have to think about the points made and the advice we put to Ministers as to the plan's fitness for purpose and its relevance to the strategy. However, we must bear in mind that the process is continuous. The implementation plan is a living document, and we will continue to press Departments to do as much as they can and to do more to deliver on the strategy's objectives.

Although we recognise that the plan is not perfect at this stage, it reflects a significant amount of what is being done across the board to deliver on gender equality. We will work to continue to improve that, including challenging Departments where appropriate.

Ms Anderson:

Does that mean that, given that the action plans have not yet been signed off, there is at least an opportunity for Departments to make them more robust?

Dr Mulligan:

Yes.

Ms Eileen Sung (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

There is a danger that, if the action plans are not published, put into the public arena, or made available on the website of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, only those who are able to get access to the Hansard report and read the proceedings of this meeting will know the sort of discussions that representatives are having.

The plans are imperfect, as I have always said, and Departments know that too. However, an agreement to publish them and to recognise them as part of a living document is important. Therefore, they should be reviewed formally in the light of everything that the Committee recommends. Therefore, I suggest that the Committee recommend their publication as a living document.

Mr Elliott:

I am concerned about the point in the presentation that states:

“Gender segregation remains an issue — it is important to accept women in non-traditional roles such as construction, driving and a more diverse range of professions, and men in caring roles such as nursing, midwifery, family work, primary school teaching”.

That is right, but most of those professions accept people from those gender groups already. I am concerned that we are trying to drive legislation or a statutory duty that is not required; indeed, Naomi highlighted that point very well earlier. There should be more carrot and less stick; there must be an encouragement and promotion of those roles among the genders that have not been traditionally associated with them, and, in that sense, there should be no difficulty.

The reality is that we are almost forcing people into a role that they do not necessarily want. The facility must be available for those who want to go into those occupations to do so; that should be promoted, and help should be given to potential applicants. However, we must not drive people into those professions.

The Chairperson:

I think that that was more of a comment than a question.

Mr Elliott:

Yes, it was.

Mr Shannon:

Mr Elliott must have been thinking along the same lines as I was. I hope that Naomi will not mind me using her to illustrate my point, but she, by her own perseverance and interest, set her own target, and she pushed it through to the end. She became an engineer, and then a politician, because she set her goal; she aimed for it, and she got it. Why could that opportunity not be afforded to others who may also wish to follow that path?

Although I understand clearly the issue and the need for action, I am a little concerned about legislation being brought in. Should we not be promoting and educating more, rather than regulating and legislating? Could we, in trying to address those issues, create a form of positive discrimination? If so, I think that we will have gone in the wrong direction. We should be encouraging and promoting those professions. I know a great many people who work in the professions in question and who have excelled in them.

I am perhaps also expressing a point of view rather than asking Gerry and Eileen a question. However, I am a little concerned about the drive for legislation, and I wonder what that would actually achieve. It may, in fact, achieve the opposite of what it sets out to.

Dr Mulligan:

There is a need to have both a carrot and a stick to make discrimination and harassment in the workplace illegal, particularly on the grounds of gender. Furthermore, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and DEL are developing measures, through the careers advisory service, to promote the movement of girls in particular into non-traditional occupations and professions. That work is consistent with trying to break down stereotypes. Therefore, one could characterise the policy approach as both examining where anti-discrimination legislation is required while proactively implementing core policies.

Mr Attwood:

I concur with Gerry's remarks, and I feel that the use of a legislative twin-track enforcement approach with penalties, coupled with softer measures and encouragement is preferable. Previous experience in the North has proven that a twin-track approach can bring one to a better place; indeed, a motion on that issue was tabled for debate in the House on Monday.

I have two questions. First, I recognise that things are imperfect, but it is a pretty elaborate form of imperfection if one Department, the Department for Regional Development, has not produced its departmental plan on gender equality two years after it is meant to have done so.

Ms Sung:

I should confess that DRD provided a generic entry on public appointments in June 2009 after being pressed to do so by OFMDFM. That submission was similar to one that was attributed to OFMDFM, but it contained an application for all Departments. However, I am afraid that I cannot recall the specific reference.

Mr Attwood:

Are you saying that the submission was plagiarised?

Ms Sung:

DRD was most helpful in suggesting that there needed to be a focus on public appointments. We suggest that that focus should be reinstated before the publication of the plan, if possible. DRD has examined where it could make a contribution, and its equality unit has some very experienced and conscientious officials. I know that those people have given a lot of thought to how they can engage with the gender equality strategy.

Mr Attwood:

Frankly, I do not know what all that means. DRD has been examining closely what it might do for two years, yet it has produced a generic target. Those people may be highly motivated, but not much seems to be happening. Whatever your words meant, that is my conclusion. Something should be done about that.

The Chairperson:

To be fair, Eileen responded to your query. If you do not like her answer, that is a different matter.

Mr Attwood:

I will move on to my second question. Given that the law and the ministerial guidance in the House of Commons both state clearly that a gender-neutral approach is not the right approach, why is it being adopted? I know that those matters are still under consideration; they are works in

progress, and things might change. Why are Departments not being advised to go the way in which the legal authority states that they should go?

Ms Sung:

I will say a few words as a person who talks to equality officials and policy leads at the coalface. The interpretation of section 75 is quite complex. Section 75(1) states that public authorities have a duty to:

“have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity”.

Section 75(1)(b) specifies that that should be:

“between men and women generally”

That difficult duty is placed on all public authorities, and it is part of an ongoing process. It is often technically difficult to identify where there are barriers and where there is no level playing field. For example, it is not always crystal clear what the gender pay gap means. It is not clear what the barrier is or what the target is — perhaps I have said too much.

Dr Mulligan:

Although I am not a lawyer — and I stress that fact — I can see that the legislation does not require that a gender-neutral approach be adopted. There are occasions when men and women need to be treated equally. However, as Eileen said, the legislation equally allows for proactive measures to compensate for barriers or disadvantage and to promote equality of opportunity in a non-neutral way. I do not see the legislation as either requiring neutrality or inhibiting proactive approaches. That is my non-legal interpretation of the legislation.

Mr Spratt:

The Chairperson did not get an answer to his question about finance. One can fill a trolley full of goods at the supermarket, but there must be money in the purse to pay for it at the checkout. There is quite a long shopping list, Gerry. It is easy to ask for all these things, but has anyone ever tried to cost this wish list?

Dr Mulligan:

When putting forward implementation plans, Departments will undoubtedly be aware of the cost implications. They would not commit to doing things if they were not aware of their ability to meet them out of their budgets. We have not pulled that together in the form of what might be described as a gender equality budget. The panel has raised that point with us, and we want to

follow up on that with the Department of Finance and Personnel. The honest answer is that we have not produced an overall costing of the measures, and, correspondingly, we have not produced an overall cost-benefit analysis to sit alongside the costing. One cannot be produced without the other.

Mr Spratt:

Childcare was discussed as an example, and the discussion about doctors was a particularly bad example. I have a young daughter-in-law who is a doctor, and she has three children who are under six years of age. She has worked in a busy hospital and as a GP, and she has to get childcare. All those things must be paid for, and there is no point in Departments raising people's expectations or aspirations if the money is not available. People will keep asking and asking, and, frankly, they do not give two damns where the money comes from.

Mr G Robinson:

Commenting on Naomi's point about transition committees, my worry is that most of them are pretty well established. How can that problem be addressed from now on? That should have been looked at much earlier.

Dr Mulligan:

I am sorry; I did not catch the original comment.

The Chairperson:

There is a strong view that women are under-represented on councils' transition committees, which were set up for the RPA.

Mrs Long:

Some of the transition committees have a female representation that is as low as 6%.

The Chairperson:

The transition committee at Omagh District Council has a female representation of 1%.

Mr G Robinson:

My point is that given that the transition committees are well established now, how can the problem be addressed?

Dr Mulligan:

I am looking at the figures, and I can see that the percentage of women on the transition committees is very low. At its highest, in Derry City Council and Strabane District Council, the proportion is 38%, but it is 6% or 7% in other district councils. I am honestly not sure whether that can be influenced now; it may well be too late in the process to do so, but we certainly want to raise that question with transition committees.

The Chairperson:

If you could raise that concern, it would be helpful.

Mr G Robinson:

Do not get me wrong; I think that the issue should be raised.

Mrs Long:

It seemed that I was becoming some sort of poster girl for doing nothing about gender inequality. Encouragement is important. Jim Shannon asked why other people cannot do what I did, but not everyone has the same circumstances. The fact that I was raised largely by a mother on her own created certain issues, and I also went to an all-girls' school. Therefore, a degree of non-typical gender stereotyping went on in my upbringing that means that I am not necessarily a traditional person. The promotion of the good points is really important, but intervention is also needed to support people. It is not enough to say that if some people can do something, everyone should be able to do it.

Frankly, it is too late for the careers advisory service to tackle gender stereotypes when people are thinking about careers. The issue must be tackled when children are playing with plastic kitchens and with hammers in nursery schools so that when someone says "doctor", the child thinks that that could be a man or a woman.

It is particularly important that DRD has a robust plan. A large part of DRD's work deals with construction and design. It creates places and spaces, it plans resources, and it deals with development. Proper balance is needed on all those issues. DRD is fairly critical to the issues, not only from the point of view of employment, but from the point of view of the functions that it performs.

My last point is about the costs. There are costs to not carrying this out that must also be considered, such as women not being engaged fully in the workforce, not being able to access employment, and not being able to provide childcare. We looked at that issue for the child poverty inquiry. An active cost is associated with doing nothing to redress those balances.

The other aspect that we need to be aware of — a crisis that we may not be seeing yet — is that women are choosing professional careers that allow them flexibility to address the childcare issue, such as careers as veterinary surgeons, dentists and doctors. That creates issues because many women who go into those professions and who cannot access childcare end up working part-time. That creates crises when it comes to people being able to access those services. We need to think about that, because that issue has been raised in respect of vets, dentists and doctors. However, that is not to say that women should not be in those roles, because they obviously should. However, they need proper childcare arrangements that are flexible enough to allow them to fulfil the demands of such jobs; for example, a vet might be called out during the night. Thought must be given to that situation, because, without it, difficulties can be created that could have economic repercussions. Therefore, the childcare issue and all the other planning issues need to be part of the process so that when there is equality in the workplace, all the issues that that addresses will be dealt with. We are dealing with a different group of people than we are traditionally used to dealing with.

We do need to be proactive, although I would stop short of engineering outcomes.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. You have heard members' comments and questions. I look forward to having ongoing discussions.

Ms Anderson:

Chairperson, on the recommendation of getting the action plans published, I initially had a little bit of a reaction to that, because I was afraid that it might result in something that resembled a tick-box exercise. However, if the action plans were put out there warts and all as a means of building on them, we should consider doing that.

The Chairperson:

Is that the Committee's view? OK.