

WOMEN'S MANIFESTO

WORKING AT THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY



wrda

WOMEN'S RESOURCE & DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Supporting Women's Groups & Networks across Northern Ireland

INTRODUCTION

This Manifesto contains a series of demands on a number of important gender equality areas. It reflects the diversity of women in NI across age, class, racial and ethnic background, sexual orientation, disability, religious and political belief.

Economic life, childcare, decision-making, education, violence, equality law and policy, and international requirements are matters that have concerned women for decades. We urge our political leaders to take action on these issues.

Much remains to be done to achieve gender equality, and we must guard against rolling back the hard won gains of previous decades. For example, welfare reforms are destined to hit families in NI harder than in the UK. NI has the highest claimant count and inactivity rate in the UK; 28% of children in NI live in poverty and a map of the areas where child poverty is most concentrated matches very closely with the areas where the conflict has been most intense. The 'Empty Purse' campaign and the lobbying which is ongoing by the Women's Sector in NI is crucial in maintaining pressure on the Assembly to recognise the impact of the pending Welfare Reform Act, cuts and zero hour contracts.

The Assembly and Local Councils need to take decisive steps to advance women's equality. We call on all parties and candidates to commit to the demands in this Manifesto, and incorporating these demands into your policy decisions.



WOMEN AND THE ECONOMY

Household incomes, poverty rates and the labour market have all worsened in NI in the last five years and more so than in Great Britain. Paid work is not an equal experience for women and men. Women are concentrated in low-paid and part-time jobs – 75% of female employees work part-time, many on zero hour contracts with neither job security nor decent conditions of employment, unable to access tax credits most needed by the poorest families. *Two thirds of those earning minimum wage or below are women* and women's annual earnings are on average 33% below that of men. Almost 80% of lone female parents aged between 16-34 live in poverty, 60% of whom are in debt. Cuts to Working

Tax Credits/Universal Credit systems have a higher impact on lone parents than on any other group. The poverty rate for pensioners is higher in NI than in other parts of GB with nearly half a million female pensioners in NI living below the poverty line including fuel poverty. Many of the 'working poor' households pay interest only mortgages, and worry about the future repossession of their homes. Migrant women workers struggle to have their qualifications recognised and are often exploited in much lower paid jobs or without access to public services or assistance. A map of the areas where child poverty is most concentrated in Northern Ireland matches very closely with the areas where the conflict has been most intense.

We call on politicians to:

- Introduce a dedicated women's employment strategy to address the dominance of women in low paid work.
- Guarantee that budget decisions made in Northern Ireland will not affect women disproportionately.
- Make every effort to ensure that in paid work there is a level playing field for women and men.
- Require mandatory pay audits and a government strategy with concrete measures and timetable to eliminate the gender pay gap and promote flexible working arrangements for men and women.

WOMEN AND CHILDCARE

In NI, **44%** of take-home pay goes to childcare costs. Lack of affordable quality childcare has an impact on women accessing both employment and training. Childcare is a gender issue; 71% of working women have family caring responsibilities on top of work.

Encouraging more mothers into work, raising wages and reducing barriers to engaging in training and development are key to reducing child poverty.

There is also a strong correlation between low child poverty rates and high maternal employment – countries with the lowest child poverty rates combine generous benefits, labour market policies which support working women and widely available free or low cost childcare.

According to the Department for Health Social Services and Public Safety's (DHSSPS) latest figures there is only **one childcare place to every 8.6 children**. To enable mothers to work, **an additional 136,242 places** need to be created.

We urge the Northern Ireland Executive to:

- Follow the example used by Nordic countries by linking early years and childcare policy and provision.
- Recognise childcare as both a social and economic issue
- Acknowledge that lack of childcare is a barrier to women entering/re-entering the labour market.
- Commit to the full implementation of the new childcare strategy (with a due date of spring 2015) and assign responsibility to a lead department.

WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING

The last assembly elections saw only 21 female MLAs elected out of 108 members and whilst this is an increase on the 15 female MLAs that sat in 2010 it is still a meagre 22.6%. Where women are almost 52% of the population this massive under-representation is detrimental to the smooth running of Northern Ireland and the peace process.

Parties decide who to put forward for candidacy as well as for other public appointments – candidate selection, co-option to vacancies in elected office and appointment to Assembly and local Government Committees are all within the control of Political Parties. However, few Councils actively outreach to women or engage them in community planning or in Regeneration and Development Committees and it is widely felt by women at all sections of society that they are not represented adequately and that their lives, families and opinions are not considered as they would be with equal representation.

The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 allows political parties to take special measures to tackle the deficit in women's representation within their Party.

A great deal of work is being done through grass roots women's organisations and women's sector organisations who develop and run programmes aimed at increasing confidence and political awareness in women, as well as through programmes such as Democrashe which focuses on supporting those women who are already in senior positions. However, without the support of political parties who should actively promote equality within their structures, there can be no peace without women.

We call on politicians to:

- Take positive action measures to ensure that women are selected as the Party's candidates for Assembly and local government elections, setting 40% as an initial target.
- Demand that the Executive and its Ministers appoint women and men equally to the Chairs and memberships of public bodies.
- Actively work with Women in Local Councils to gather baseline data on women in the party and to develop and resource a gender action plan with targets and timetables.
- Engage with the women's sector and appoint women to community planning processes and social, economic, cultural and other Committees established by Government or local Councils.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In 2012/13, there were over 47,597 calls to the 24-hour Domestic Violence helpline and Refuge was provided to 880 women and 546 children – **every day 5 women and children turn to a refuge for help** – and outreach services supported 3659 women and 4469 children. Almost 27,190 domestic incidents were reported to the PSNI; **29% of all murders in Northern Ireland in 2012/13 had a domestic abuse motivation** and 75% of adult victims of domestic crime were women.

The PSNI responded to a domestic incident every 19 minutes of every day of the year.

Domestic abuse crimes (11,160) represent approximately 11% of the overall crime in NI, - two and a half times as many domestic abuse crimes as drug offences, five times more domestic abuse crimes than thefts of motor vehicles and more domestic abuse crimes than burglary offences.

Government and voluntary agencies observe that trafficking of women, children and men in Northern Ireland for sexual exploitation and labour exploitation is increasing.

Northern Ireland lacks effective rape crisis provision.

We call on politicians to:

- Seek amendment of the Legal Aid rules to give all victims of domestic violence automatic right of access to legal protection and justice free of charge.
- Safeguard the benefits that many women who have experienced domestic violence rely upon and press the Social Security Agency to improve the processing and payment of these benefits.
- Establish an emergency fund for women victims of domestic violence who have no or limited access to public funds so they can seek refuge from their abusers.
- Pursue a strategy and sustainable resources to deliver support to children and young people affected by domestic and sexual violence.
- Support an awareness raising programme to highlight the issue of human trafficking and sexual slavery across communities in NI.
- Introduce programmes in schools to challenge attitudes that promote gender based violence and to safeguard women and children.

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & JUSTICE

The control, regulation, and stigmatisation of female fertility, bodies and sexuality is politically and culturally policed in Northern Ireland. Reproductive health and justice are an integral part of the global movements for women's rights and against poverty which are contained within the global human rights framework.

Access to sexual and reproductive health services is crucial to women's health and well-being. Provision of non-directive information and advice is an international requirement under CEDAW yet clinic staff, and those trying to access independent advice and support, often face intimidation. There is no mandatory sex education in primary and secondary schools in Northern Ireland. Provision of emergency contraception is



restricted by cost and accessibility. Termination of pregnancy is lawful in Northern Ireland, but under highly restricted circumstances, forcing over 1,500 women a year travel to Britain. The current Department of Justice consultation does not extend far enough to cover all circumstances where women would need access in Northern Ireland when faced with a crisis pregnancy.

We call on politicians to:

- Introduce a standardised programme of relationships and sexuality education in the school curriculum.
- Unrestricted access to contraception and non-directive information.
- Extend sexual and reproductive health services across Northern Ireland.
- Use evidence based policy-making on reproductive health issues.
- De-criminalise abortion in line with international human rights standards so that health professionals can provide such care without the threat of prosecution.

THE COMMUNITY WOMEN'S SECTOR

The women's sector is highly dependent on public funds due to the essential services that groups provide: childcare, education and training, non-traditional skills training, domestic violence support, well-being and mental health programmes, neighbourhood renewal, urban and rural development initiatives, cross-community projects and services in disadvantaged communities. Organisations also respond to government consultations and assist with public policy development.

Women's groups make a vital contribution to community cohesion and the overall well-being of society, but lack of funding has led to the closure of a number of women's organisations. Despite serious under-funding, the Northern Ireland Executive's review of resources is unlikely to make additional resources available to the women's sector. In the future, funding for community groups, including those in the women's sector, will be devolved to local councils.

We call on politicians to:

- Proactively engage with women's groups across the diverse range of organisations and ensure women are included in community planning.
- Support the call made by the UN's CEDAW Committee in 2008 for "increased and sustained funding" for women's groups.
- Ensure that women's groups will not be disadvantaged when Local Councils have greater power to decide on funding for the community sector.

EQUALITY STANDARDS

Despite 40 years of legislation,¹ policy change, national standards and international obligations², inequalities remain for women. Sex discrimination legislation has now fallen behind the protections of the Equality Act 2010 in Britain which allows for stronger equal pay provisions and an extended range of positive action measures. The demands in this Manifesto are endorsed by parallel policies and requirements at the European and international levels.

We call on politicians to:

- Review and strengthen sex equality legislation in respect of equal pay provisions and positive action measures, and work for legislative harmonisation in single equality legislation.
- Introduce robust measures to collect gender disaggregated data and use the analysis to deliver gender responsive budgeting across public spending.
- Match the situation of women in Northern Ireland against the European Union Women's Charter and meet the challenge of the EU Strategy for equality between women and men through effective delivery of the Northern Ireland Gender Equality Strategy.
- Work with the UK Government to make a full report to the UN CEDAW Committee on progress and remaining work to be done in Northern Ireland to meet the Committee's expectations as set out in its concluding observations in 2008.
- Fully implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 'Women, Peace and Security' in Northern Ireland and base the reform of local government on the principles of UNSCR 1325.



EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF WOMEN

The right to education is one of the most important means to achieve gender equality.

Knowledge is power and education ensures that women and girls are in a position to make informed decisions regarding their health and quality of life and gives women better access to resources they need to build a brighter economic future for themselves and their society. Investment in formal and informal education and training programs for girls and women is one of the best means to achieve development and economic growth which is both lasting and sustainable and a society which is committed to peace.

Females leaving school tend to be better qualified than males and are more likely to progress to higher education yet their future wage earning capacities are not in line with their potential.

In 2011/12, 67% of girls left school with at least One A-level and 64% with two or more A levels, compared with 51% and 47% of boys. 82% of girls left school with at least 5 GCSE

grades A*- C compared with 71% of boys. 58% of all students enrolled at the NI universities are women and females are 50% of the NI Further Education Colleges enrolments. At University level, women dominate in subjects allied to Medicine (82%), Education (78%) and Languages (72%) and the subject areas with the lowest proportions of females are; Architecture, building & planning (29%), Computer Science (24%) and Engineering & Technology (17%).

Girls' educational attainment is not reflected in their position in the labour market. Women's 'traditional' role as wives and mothers has not disappeared but has been reinvented to fit in with the needs of the market, juggling the triple demands of working, childcare and family life.

We call on politicians to:

- Ensure that the high educational attainments achieved by girls translates into success in the labour market where employment policies support working mothers.
- Support strategies to encourage girls and women to enrol in science, technology, engineering and maths classes.
- Ensure that students are given non-gendered careers advice and girls are supported to undertake non-traditional career paths.
- Guarantee that there will be equal access to all apprenticeship opportunities and general work training opportunities for women and men.

WOMEN AND PEACEBUILDING

Women from many communities in NI have shown great commitment to participating in discussions relating to Peacebuilding. They have contributed to debates and the development of principles to take forward issues relating to Prevention, Participation and Representation, Protection and Security, Recovery, Relief and Rehabilitation. *The Gender Equality Strategy in NI and the National Women's Strategy combined with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 National Action Plan in Ireland* provides mechanisms to establish the inclusion of these principles in domestic public policy and is beneficial to society as a whole. The need to ensure that not only governments but also local politicians include women's voices in the work that they do, and that women's rights are protected and promoted is of vital importance.



We call on politicians to:

- Further develop a robust, gendered, evidence base to support the monitoring of peacebuilding strategies, programmes and funding and to publish all evaluations and assessments from this process.
- Ensure that all new Supercouncils adopt the model currently in place in Belfast City Council and implement the Women in Local Councils initiative which provides a model for gender action planning to address underrepresentation at local government level.
- Form a cost effective partnership with women's organisations to address the disproportionately high mental health challenges faced by women, which have resulted from the conflict.
- Ensure the implementation of the recommendations from the 'Women, Peace and Security' Strategic Guide and Toolkit.

Women coming from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds suffer greatest discrimination in terms of access to services and rights. These are well-documented facts. The marginalised groups include lesbian and bisexual women; transgender women; women with disabilities; older women and women from ethnic minority communities. As well as experiencing the discrimination and disadvantage that all women face, those who fit into these groups will be further disadvantaged due to their multiple identities.

1 Including Equal Pay Act (NI) 1970 as amended; Sex Discrimination (NI) Order 1976, as amended; Section 75, Northern Ireland Act 1998

2 Including Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) (CEDAW); UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000)



A SPECIAL THANKS

As a membership-led organisation, the views and experiences from our engagement with members have been at the heart of shaping our Manifesto.

In 2014 WRDA facilitated a series of workshops incorporating the views of over 100 women from women centres, groups and organisations.

We would like to thank all the women, staff and organisations including Falls, Greenway, Windsor Women's Centre, Women's TEC and everyone who donated their time and effort in working with us in producing this manifesto.

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