



Women's Regional Consortium

Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas

Response to: ECNI Corporate Plan 2019-2022

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Enabling women into non-traditional employment

Foyle Women's
Information
Network



Women's Regional Consortium: Working to Support Women in Rural Communities and Disadvantaged Urban Areas

1. Introduction

1.1 This response has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Communities and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

1.2 The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.¹ The seven groups are as follows:

- ♀ Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project lead
- ♀ Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- ♀ Women's Support Network (WSN)
- ♀ Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- ♀ Women's TEC
- ♀ Women's Centre Derry
- ♀ Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

1.3 The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium ensures that there is a continuous two way flow of information between government and the sector. It also ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of

¹ Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisation

consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately results in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

1.4 The Consortium works to advance the interests and enhance the wellbeing of disadvantaged, marginalised women in some of the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland. This includes women who have suffered discrimination and face inequalities in their everyday lives.

1.5 The Women’s Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland’s Corporate Plan 2019-2022.

2. General comments

2.1 *“If you don’t work in the field of gender equality it can be easy to assume that the equality of opportunity that is now embedded into our society through anti-discrimination law means there should be no difference in how women and men experience the world.”*² It is the widespread assumption that despite over 40 years of anti-discrimination legislation that women are now equal in economic, political and social life in Northern Ireland. However the reality is far from the case.

2.2 While there is no doubt there have been improvements in securing greater equality in Northern Ireland there is much still to be done in this regard. We welcome the fact that the Equality Commission has acknowledged this in their Corporate Plan: *“There is also no doubt that there is much still to be done to secure greater equality for all – across many public policy domains there are both enduring inequalities and in some cases emerging ones.”*

² Women at the Heart of Public Consultation, A guide for Public Authorities and Women’s Organisations, WRDA, 2018

2.3 The number of enquiries made to the Equality Commission every year evidences the need for continued work and focus on enduring inequalities. Enquiry statistics to the Commission in 2017/2018 show that of the 3,500+ enquiries in that year 25% contacted with a gender enquiry. This is the second biggest area of enquiry second only to disability at 44%³ *“Over the past five years, the percentage breakdown of enquiries has been quite consistent. Disability discrimination is always the most reported, and sex discrimination is consistently the second most reported.”*⁴

2.4 We welcome a number of recent sex discrimination and pregnancy discrimination cases supported by the Equality Commission.⁵ These cases highlight the very real need for the existence and enforcement of gender equality legislation. However we believe that gender inequality is a much underreported issue and much more needs to be done to tackle its root causes and to enforce the legislation so that it can truly act as a deterrent to discriminatory attitudes and behaviours.

2.5 A number of pieces of research also show the extent of sexual harassment and gender discrimination that exists in Northern Ireland and in wider society. This type of behaviour continues to exist despite the existence and knowledge of anti-discrimination legislation. It is therefore vital that the focus remains on the issue of gender discrimination and on enforcement of the law.

2.6 Seventeen percent of people in Northern Ireland said they have experienced sexual harassment by someone in a superior position. The damning report from the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants makes for grim reading when Northern Ireland is compared to other UK regions about

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<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Corporate/Annual%20Reports/AnnualReview2017-18.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.equalityni.org/Footer-Links/News/Individuals/Complaints-of-discrimination-2016-2017>

⁵ <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/news/settlements-reached-two-recent-sex-discrimination-cases>

ethical workplace behaviour.⁶ Northern Ireland had more than double the next highest figure for sexual harassment (8% for Scotland and London).

2.7 A poll by Investors in People⁷ showed that around 60% of workers in Northern Ireland say gender discrimination exists in their workplace. It also revealed that 50% of those surveyed say they have experienced gender discrimination first-hand (the second highest proportion of workers who had actually experienced gender discrimination). Investors in People Chairperson Valerie Todd said: *"The results of Investors in People's Perceptions of Workplace Gender Discrimination 2018 reveal that an unacceptably high proportion of workers in Northern Ireland feel that gender discrimination exists. Moreover, the fact that nearly half of workers in the region have experienced this sort of discrimination shows that there is still much to be done in ensuring that workplaces across the country are providing fair and inclusive environments for all workers, regardless of gender."*

2.8 Research by the Equality Commission⁸ showed that half of women they questioned believed their career opportunities were negatively affected by having a baby. Over one third (36%) said they had been treated unfairly or disadvantaged because of their pregnancy or because they took maternity leave. This kind of treatment has untold impacts on women affecting their mental health, career opportunities and their finances. Within complaints of sex discrimination to the Equality Commission the largest single category over recent years has been maternity and pregnancy discrimination.⁹

2.9 Beyond Northern Ireland the Women & Equalities Committee have been looking at the issue of the sexual harassment of women and girls in public places.¹⁰ The Committee's nine-month inquiry heard evidence of widespread

⁶ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/northern-ireland-has-highest-rate-of-sexual-harassment-in-uk-workplace-but-no-ones-admitting-blame-36241154.html>

⁷ https://www.investorsinpeople.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/IIP2237_IIP_IWD2018_BROCHURE_WEB_AWFINAL.pdf

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https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/Expecting_Equality-PregnancyInvestigation-SummaryReport.pdf

⁹ <https://www.equalityni.org/Footer-Links/News/Individuals/Complaints-of-discrimination-2016-2017>

¹⁰ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/701/70102.htm>

problems of men and boys sexually harassing women and even girls on buses and trains, in bars and clubs, in online spaces and at university, in parks and on the street. Street harassment included being shouted at and catcalled through to sexual assaults. MPs are now calling on the Government to take action on this issue.

2.10 This followed another report from Plan International UK¹¹ which found that 66% of girls in the UK had experienced unwanted sexual attention or sexual or physical contact in a public place leading to many girls feeling that street harassment is “*all part of growing up.*” Plan International have called on the Government to recognise street harassment as a form of gender-based violence. This follows the introduction of new laws against street harassment in France in August 2018 allowing for on-the-spot fines.

2.11 Prejudice and harassment are mentioned in the context of education and employment in the Corporate Plan but there is nothing specific about prejudice and harassment in public spaces.

Recommendation

The Corporate Plan should address the issue of prejudice and harassment in public spaces.

2.12 This research and statistics all point to the fact that despite the existence of sex discrimination laws gender discrimination continues to exist in Northern Ireland and beyond. Enforcement is not a clear focus of the Corporate Plan and yet improvement is clearly needed in this area. This gives cause for concern and undoubtedly much more needs to be done in the realm of education and enforcement around the law.

Recommendation

The Corporate Plan should have a greater focus on enforcement of the existing legislation. The plan should include goals in relation to enforcement which can be clearly measured in terms of their effectiveness.

¹¹ <https://plan-uk.org/act-for-girls/street-harassment>

Brexit

2.13 The Corporate Plan only makes passing reference to Brexit. We understand that there is still great uncertainty about the UK's exit from the European Union and its impact on Northern Ireland. However research suggests that Brexit could potentially pose a number of threats to Northern Ireland at the level of the economic and beyond, as well as significant risk to gender equality, women's rights and economic wellbeing in low-income households.¹²

2.14 EU law has had a significant impact on the rights of women. The EU Charter recognises that equality between men and women should be viewed as a priority and that this principle of equality should not prevent the 'maintenance or adoption of measures providing for specific advantages in favour of the under-represented sex'. This reaffirms the need for structural change and recognises that when dealing with systematic gender discrimination it is often necessary to take positive action to redress historic underrepresentation and to ensure that women are properly represented in all areas of public life. As well as this specific assertion of equality between the genders, the rights of women are protected across the full range of rights contained within the Charter and the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sex and a range of other grounds is recognised in article 21.¹³

2.15 Another area of priority raised by the Human Rights Consortium¹⁴ is the issue of gendered violence. The EU has sought to coordinate efforts to combat violence against women and girls including the support given to victims of crimes and policing and security measures. These civil and criminal measures have particular resonance for Northern Ireland due to its land border with Ireland.

2.16 Concerns about the invisibility of women's rights in the Brexit debate and women's rights post-Brexit have led to the formation of the Women and Brexit

¹² Brexit: Women's Perspectives, Women's Regional Consortium Research Paper, October 2017

¹³ Rights At Risk, Brexit, Human Rights and Northern Ireland, Human Rights Consortium, January 2018

¹⁴ Ibid

Collective. This collective has five issues of particular concern for women in Northern Ireland:

- Protection of Rights;
- Safeguarding the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement;
- The continuation of everyday life post Brexit (particularly along border areas);
- Loss of EU funding; and
- Lack of women 'at the table'.

2.17 As Northern Ireland's equality body the Equality Commission should be leading the way in the promotion of equality of opportunity and ensuring no regression in equality law and rights is delivered by Brexit.

Recommendation

We believe that a robust gender perspective on the wider Brexit debate remains paramount and therefore the Corporate Plan should specifically mention the potential for negative impacts on women in Northern Ireland.

Welfare Reform and austerity

2.18 The draft Corporate Plan makes no reference to the government's welfare reform and austerity agenda that has had significant impacts on people in Northern Ireland particularly those who are the most vulnerable. While the welfare reform changes did not set out to specifically target women it is clear to see that women are more affected by these changes than men. Research shows that 86% of the savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit changes since 2010 will have come from women.¹⁵

2.19 The UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Sir Phillip Alston said after a recent visit to the UK: *"If you got a group of misogynists in a room and said how can we make this system work for men*

¹⁵ Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes, Richard Cracknell, Richard Keen, Commons Briefing Papers SN06758, December 2017

and not for women, they would not have come up with too many ideas that are not already in place.”¹⁶

2.20 Regardless of whether these policies are targeted at women or not the effect is the same. Women are more affected by the welfare reform and austerity changes which have been introduced by government over the last number of years.

2.21 It is equally concerning that major social security reform is being rolled out in Northern Ireland without the accountability of elected representatives due to the collapse of devolution here. It is therefore of the utmost importance that public bodies such as the Equality Commission use their powers and duties to protect against discrimination and promote equality.

Recommendation

The Corporate Plan should make specific reference to the welfare reform and austerity agendas being imposed by government. The Equality Commission should include key actions to protect against inequality for those most impacted by welfare reform particularly women who are significantly affected by these reforms.

Draft Programme for Government

2.22 In our response to the Draft Programme for Government¹⁷ (PfG) the Consortium raised concerns, in the context of austerity, Brexit, political and legal uncertainty and projections of financial hardship for the vulnerable, about social justice and gender equality for vulnerable females in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland. We stated that the Draft PfG failed to explicitly integrate the kind of gender perspective that research suggests might best allow government to maximise the opportunity to pursue gender equality and

¹⁶ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/11/16/welfare-system-cruel-misogynistic-un-expert-warns-damning-report/>

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<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/final%20pfg%20response%2012.16i.pdf>

so improve life outcomes for women particularly those who are the most vulnerable.

2.23 The alignment of the Equality Commission's Draft Corporate Plan with the Draft PfG therefore gives some cause for concern. In our response to the Draft PfG we noted: "*It is troubling in the extreme that a programme delivery document – specifically framed in terms of advancing equality for all citizens – should make no allusion whatsoever to addressing gender inequality, and thus should conspicuously neglect to articulate the kind of gender justice perspective fundamentally required to help address the gendered vulnerability at hand.*"¹⁸ As the Draft PfG is not particularly strong on equality it could mean that work on key areas of inequality are missed or not given the priority they deserve.

2.24 In addition to this without a functioning devolved administration the key focus of the Draft PfG may be lost somewhat. The Committee system is an essential part of the Northern Ireland Assembly and where proper scrutiny took place. Without the fully operational structures and scrutiny of devolved government in Northern Ireland the Draft PfG cannot effectively achieve a fairer and more equal society.

3. Specific comments

Consultation on content of Draft Corporate Plan

3.1 We would have liked to have seen some genuine consultation with individuals and groups on what was included in the draft of the Corporate Plan. We refer to the example of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) in working on their Strategic Plan for 2019-2022. The NIHRC organised a series of Strategic Planning Consultations to produce the priorities for its Strategic Plan and to ensure the views of their external stakeholders were

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<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/final%20pfg%20response%2012.16i.pdf>

heard as they planned for the future. This would have been a useful exercise in the development of the Equality Commission's Draft Corporate Plan.

*"We should all be aiming for more meaningful participation opportunities than just consultation, as is our right, and challenging public institutions to invest more time and resources into working with women in the community to create policy, plan services and make decisions that affect their lives."*¹⁹

Recommendation

We would like to have seen more meaningful participation opportunities in the development of the content of the draft Corporate Plan to ensure the views of external stakeholders were reflected from the very start.

Key Actions

3.2 The key actions listed throughout the Corporate Plan read like statements of the Equality Commission's functions. It would be more useful if the 'Key Actions' sections contained statements of intent with more detailed information on how these would be achieved. This would inevitably help with measuring the success or otherwise of the plan.

Recommendation

The 'Key Actions' section under each Strategic Outcome should contain statements of intent with detailed information on how these would be achieved.

Strategic Outcome Area – Employment

3.3 We believe the draft Corporate Plan has missed an opportunity to highlight the importance of gender mainstreaming employment policies as a means of ensuring employment equality. Gender-proofing employment practices will lead to better equality of opportunity for both women and men by systematically addressing practices and attitudes in the world of work.

¹⁹ Women at the Heart of Public Consultation, A guide for Public Authorities and Women's Organisations, WRDA, 2018

Recommendation

The draft Corporate Plan should draw specific attention to gender-proofing employment practices so that all employment policies and practices are gender-proofed as standard good practice.

Strategic Outcome – Increased choice for women in employment

3.4 We find the use of the word ‘choice’ unhelpful in this Strategic Outcome. Often women’s ‘choices’ are blamed for employment inequality rather than prejudicial attitudes, systems or structures.

Recommendation

Rephrase the Strategic Outcome on women to “Increased access for women in employment.”

3.5 We find it difficult to understand how there can be a Strategic Outcome Area around Employment with an Outcome specifically on increased access for women in employment without considering childcare. We believe this is a central issue on which increased access for many women in employment is based.

3.6 There is no doubt that there is a lack of access to affordable, quality childcare in Northern Ireland and that this impacts primarily on women’s access to employment. Making matters worse is the lack of a Northern Ireland Executive which is holding up progress on a Childcare Strategy.

3.7 Research by Employers for Childcare shows that the current infrastructure is acting as a barrier to work and impacting negatively on family well-being. The high cost of childcare can put parents into financial difficulty which can lead to stress and anxiety or force parents to stop work altogether.²⁰

²⁰ Northern Ireland Childcare Cost Survey 2017, Employers for Childcare, March 2018

3.8 Childcare cannot not be seen in isolation from a number of other factors which will also impact on women’s access to employment. These include the impact of the government’s welfare reform and austerity agenda, the rising cost of living, uncertainty arising from Brexit and changes in financial support for childcare. The existence of an affordable and accessible childcare infrastructure has the potential to deliver improved access to employment for women.

Recommendation

Access to affordable, quality childcare should be a potential indicator within the Strategic Outcome Area “Increased access for women in employment.”

Strategic Outcome – Freedom from prejudice and harassment at work

3.9 The statistics outlined in Section 2 above show the prevalence of prejudice and harassment in relation to gender that persists in workplaces today. This is despite the existence and knowledge of sex discrimination legislation. As previously stated we believe more work needs to be done on enforcement of the existing legislation so that individuals and organisations are both fully informed about the law and sufficiently deterred from discriminatory behaviours.

Strategic Outcome – Education

Strategic Outcome – Tackling educational inequalities

3.10 The right to education is one of the most important means to achieve gender equality. We are pleased to see a reference to appropriate, accessible and affordable childcare under this Strategic Outcome. This is often one of the barriers that women face to accessing education.

3.11 Community based education and training for women is particularly important for rural women supporting them to rebuild confidence and capability to enter the workplace. Community based education is generally based on the local community need, and as such takes account of the complexity of women’s

lives and barriers to education such as childcare, course fees and academic environment.²¹

3.12 Research by the Women's Regional Consortium identified that in some (rural) cases, a total absence of any kind of community provision was reported. In large part, this absence was attributed to funding deficits that reflected longstanding rural/urban statutory resourcing differentials across the sector, captured as 'historic underinvestment in rural areas'.²²

Recommendation

We would like to see an indicator around access to community-based education and training, resources for which have been cut over recent years. This would help to tackle gender inequality particularly among rural women and women in disadvantaged areas.

Strategic Outcome – Access and participation

Women and Brexit

3.13 There is genuine concern among women and women's groups about the underrepresentation of women's voices in the Brexit debate. While progress has been made in increasing women's political representation in both the Assembly and in the leadership of political parties this has not translated into a more inclusive discussion on Brexit.²³ Added to this is the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly and devolved government which has made it even harder for Northern Ireland to input into Brexit debates. These issues are further exacerbated for women who already face obstacles to having their voices heard.

²¹ <https://www.nirwn.org/our-work-nirwn/education-training/>

²² Community-based women's education/training: Women's perceptions of gaps in provision, Women's Regional Consortium, September 2014

²³ Louise Coyle, Charting Brexit conference <http://www.humanrightsconsortium.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/06/LCoyle.pdf> (June 2017)

3.14 It is vital that women are assured a platform to have their voices heard so they can influence both the local decision-making which will impact on women's rights in Northern Ireland and also the UK-wide decisions of the Westminster government. In addition, it is vital that the negotiations between the EU and the UK government make space to hear women's voices and concerns and to address the very real risks to rights which women face in the Brexit process.²⁴

Lack of Devolved Government

3.15 The lack of devolved government in Northern Ireland also further limits the potential for women's voices to be heard 'at the table'. We are concerned that the longer Northern Ireland continues without devolved government this will worsen the situation for women's effective participation and representation in the decisions which affect their lives.

Strategic Outcome – Participation in Public and Political Life

3.16 We are pleased to see that the draft Corporate Plan includes participation rates of women as a potential indicator. Given the current political situation with Brexit and the lack of devolved government we have increased concerns for women's participation in public and political life.

3.17 We would like to see some concrete commitment to achieving more equal participation in the Corporate Plan. As the equality body for Northern Ireland the Equality Commission should be advocating positive action measures to work towards equal representation. The Equality Commission should also be promoting good practice in this regard and should refer to the DARD Audit of Inequalities and Action Plan²⁵ which includes targets for achieving gender balance. This kind of target setting within a defined timeframe encourages action planning to achieve targets rather than aspirational statements which are more in line with PfG language.

²⁴ Rights At Risk, Brexit, Human Rights and Northern Ireland, Human Rights Consortium, January 2018

²⁵ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dard/audit-of-inequalities-and-action-plan-combined.pdf>

3.18 Consideration must also be given to the barriers that rural women face in effective participation. The accessibility of education, training, work and childcare provision and the cost and availability of public transport are factors in determining women's participation particularly in rural areas.²⁶

Recommendation

The Corporate Plan must keep participation rates of women as a priority area given the potential for women's participation in public and political life to suffer due to the lack of devolved government and Brexit.

Recommendation

The Corporate Plan should include positive action measures to work towards achieving equal participation of women and promote good practice through the setting of specific targets for gender balance.

Strategic Outcome – Access to Information and digital services

3.19 The government's Digital Strategy²⁷ launched in November 2012 set out how the government would transform the way it delivers services to citizens including moving services online. This "digital by default" approach to welfare benefits could exclude some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people from accessing the services they rely on.

3.20 The advent of welfare reform has compounded this "digital by default" approach particularly with the introduction of Universal Credit. Universal Credit which replaces six existing 'legacy benefits' will primarily be by online application requiring claimants to create a Universal Credit account online.

3.21 Figures show that around 5% of properties (40,000) in Northern Ireland are unable to access broadband speeds needed to meet a typical household's

²⁶ Rights At Risk, Brexit, Human Rights and Northern Ireland, Human Rights Consortium, January 2018

²⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-strategy>

needs with rural areas being the worst affected.²⁸ In addition there are issues around digital skills with 4.3 million people (8%) in the UK with zero basic digital skills and 16% (8.6 million) of the UK are not able to fill out an online application form.²⁹ In Northern Ireland 14% of people receiving benefits have low or no digital capability.³⁰

3.22 In his statement the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Sir Phillip Alston highlighted that many poorer and more vulnerable households “*are effectively offline without digital skills.*” With reference to Universal Credit he said: “*Universal Credit has built a digital barrier that effectively obstructs many individuals’ access to their entitlements. Women, older people, people who do not speak English and the disabled are more likely to be unable to overcome this hurdle.*”³¹

3.23 These figures coupled with the welfare reform agenda mean that access to information and digital services is now a priority issue. We are pleased to see access to information and digital services as a Strategic Outcome in the draft Corporate Plan but we believe that welfare reform should also be mentioned in this section and its impact on various groups, including women, kept under review.

Recommendation

The digital by default approach to Welfare Reform (particularly in relation to the roll out of Universal Credit) should be a consideration under the Strategic Outcome for Access to Information and Digital Services.

²⁸ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/130736/Connected-Nations-2018-main-report.pdf

²⁹ <https://www.lloydsbank.com/banking-with-us/whats-happening/consumer-digital-index/key-findings.asp#digitalskills>

³⁰ https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/LB-Consumer-Digital-Index-2018-Report.pdf

³¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23881&LangID=E>

Strategic Outcome – Mainstreaming and championing equality

3.24 The draft Corporate Plan focuses on Section 75 groups that experience inequalities. In order to properly mainstream and champion equality we would welcome a commitment to the extension of Section 75 to include inequalities between urban and rural areas and economic disadvantage.

3.25 The Equality Coalition has suggested that there should be additions to the nine current Section 75 categories. One of the proposals has been the explicit inclusion of a ground relating to socio-economic status.³²

3.26 In Northern Ireland 370,000 people live in poverty, 110,000 of whom are children.³³ Northern Ireland has higher worklessness and lower employment than other parts of the UK which are important factors affecting poverty in Northern Ireland.³⁴ Poverty is one of the biggest issues in determining people's life outcomes and must therefore be a consideration in creating a more equal society.

3.27 Around 670,000 people live in rural communities in Northern Ireland (around 37% of the population).³⁵ Research by NIRWN shows that rural women are under increasing pressure from the economic climate. *“Historic underfunding of rural women’s activities and underinvestment in rural areas; centralisation of service support; lack of infrastructure, and the burden of caring responsibilities is leaving rural women experiencing more poverty and social isolation than ever before.”*³⁶

Recommendation

Consideration should be given to the nature of the barriers that people (particularly women) from areas of high deprivation and those living in

³² Equal to the Task? Investigative powers and effective enforcement of the ‘Section 75’ equality duty, An Equality Coalition, research report, January 2018

³³ Poverty in Northern Ireland 2018, Joseph Rowntree Foundation Briefing, Helen Barnard, February 2018

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dard/rural-statistics-infographic-2016-final.pdf>

³⁶ Rural Women’s Manifesto, NIRWN, September 2015

rural areas face around the four Strategic Outcome Areas identified in the draft Corporate Plan.

“Some women bear the brunt of gender inequality due to other intersecting barriers connected to poverty, disability, race or sexual orientation. If we can understand the way to address gender inequality for the most marginalised women then this will benefit all women.”³⁷

Enforcement

3.28 As previously mentioned enforcement is not a clear focus of the draft Corporate Plan and we believe that much more needs to be done in this regard so that equality can be truly mainstreamed.

3.29 Many public sector bodies are treating screening and equality impact assessments as ‘tick-box’ exercises. Evidence from the Commission’s ongoing advisory role and recent research³⁸ suggests that, while there is some good screening practice, there is also evidence that in some cases screening exercises are not meaningful and have become a ‘tick box’ process. Evidence also suggests that the number of EQIAs conducted by public authorities is low. In some cases where public authorities carry out EQIAs they say they are treating men and women the same but they are not actually addressing pre-existing inequalities.

3.30 While equality duties are in place for public bodies there is still much work to be done to ensure that these are properly complied with in the spirit of true equality.

³⁷ Women at the Heart of Public Consultation, A guide for Public Authorities and Women’s Organisations, WRDA, 2018

³⁸ Section 75 Screening and Equality Impact Assessment: A Review of Recent Practice. Policy Arc Limited and Kramer Consultancy Services Ltd, June 2016

Recommendation

As part of its oversight role the Equality Commission should do more to ensure ‘proper’ compliance with equality duties by public authorities and actions in this regard should be detailed in the Corporate Plan.

4. Conclusion

We acknowledge the difficulties faced by the Equality Commission due to budget reductions and reduced staffing levels which meant that difficult choices had to be made with regards to priorities for work. However we believe the impacts of wider political, economic and social change have adversely affected gender equality in Northern Ireland and beyond. Therefore gender equality issues must remain high on the agenda for Northern Ireland’s equality body.

One of the Equality Commission’s greatest strengths has been its ability to use its power to speak out on issues that matter for women, highlighting inequalities and providing support and guidance to enable women to access their rights. Unfortunately the reality of gender based discrimination is still pervasive and much work remains to be done to secure greater equality for all. That is why we have made a number of recommendations in this response around the area of enforcement of the existing legislation in relation to gender so that the Corporate Plan can help deliver true equality for women.