

A photograph of the Northern Ireland Assembly Building, a large, classical-style building with many windows and a central entrance, set against a clear sky.

Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 2003

WOMEN'S

Manifesto

A black and white photograph of a woman with short hair, wearing a dark top, sitting and reading a newspaper. The image is partially obscured by a large, light-colored silhouette of a woman's head and shoulders on the right side of the page.

INTRODUCTION

This joint Manifesto, produced by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, the Women's Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Women's Policy Group and endorsed by numerous women's groups and other organisations represents a set of demands around a number of key gender equality areas that need to be addressed by the incoming Assembly.

Women in Northern Ireland constitute a diverse group in terms of age, social class, life experience, racial and ethnic background, sexual orientation, disability and religious and political belief. The Manifesto respects this diversity.

Women will recognise the topics that have concerned them for decades. And, while women individually and collectively, have made huge gains, society in Northern Ireland doesn't come near to being equal – not in the home, not in the workplace, not in political or public life.

While the statutory duty placed on public bodies to promote equality in their policy making under s75 has the potential to transform the situation of women, the Assembly can be a key player in shaping the broader equality agenda. We therefore challenge the incoming Assembly to place the issues this Manifesto highlights in the mainstream of policy making and ask that all candidates commit themselves to achieving this.

ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

Women are at greater risk of poverty at all stages in their lives, with lone parents and pensioners being particularly vulnerable. Therefore the economic situation for women is a crucial aspect of gender equality.

Women are still more likely to be employed in low paid sectors, work part time and be paid less than their male counterparts. The pay gap currently stands at 81%.

- **How will you/your party promote better gender equality legislation to protect women from discrimination and to enable their full and active participation in all levels of our society?**

Women are still primarily responsible for domestic work such as childcare, eldercare, cooking and cleaning and there are far fewer childcare places in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain.

Women are still more likely to rely on means tested benefits than men to support themselves and their families.

- **What are you/your party going to do to ensure that the social security and tax systems meet the particular needs of women?**
- **What are you/your party going to do to ensure that women in Northern Ireland have access to affordable childcare?**

THE COMMUNITY WOMEN'S SECTOR

There are over four hundred locally based women's groups, networks, centres and projects in Northern Ireland. 68% of these are located and working in areas of social disadvantage.

The work of the sector is threefold:

- responding to individual need through provision of education and information
- contributing to community and rural development and regeneration programmes
- undertaking collective action to redress women's economic disadvantage, under-representation in decision-making, and social and cultural exclusion.

Despite a stated commitment to support community development work and to pursue equality objectives, Government funding contributes only 8.3% of the resources needed by the sector. The derisory amount indicates the low value placed on the crucial work undertaken by women in the community.

- **What actions are planned by you/your party to bring expenditure in line with the need to support this work?**

Northern Ireland is moving to a more participative mode of government. Section 75, New TSN and other policy imperatives depend on the participation and expertise of excluded groups. Yet excluded groups by definition have least resources for this work.

- **Will your party call for funding to support the participation of marginalised groups?**

WOMEN AND DECISION-MAKING

Women's voices are not fully represented within the political culture of Northern Ireland and we believe that political parties must do more to remove the barriers preventing women from becoming elected representatives.

The Sex Discrimination (Election of Candidates) Act 2000 allows for all-women short-lists as a means of redressing the gender imbalance in the selection of candidates. It is also important that women are selected to stand in constituencies where they can win.

- **How will your party ensure equal representation of women and men within party executives and as candidates for local, Assembly and Westminster elections?**
- **What is your party doing to help change the culture and attitudes that alienate women and young people from the political process and prevent women from being elected?**

Women make up only 32% of public appointments and the evidence is that this figure is decreasing.

- **What policy does your party have to ensure greater representation of women in public appointments?**
- **What will your party do to ensure that women in Northern Ireland can participate in UK, European and United Nations structures concerned with progressing women's issues?**

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH ARE CENTRAL TO OUR LIVES.

Because of women's particular reproductive capacities, access to sexual and reproductive health services is critical to their health and well-being.

Adequate resources for sexual health services, including family planning clinics is essential.

Well resourced and easily accessible clinics specialising in sexually transmitted infections (Genito-Urinary-Medicine) are key elements in creating a society where good sexual health is the norm.

Support for good, age-appropriate sex education in all schools is essential.

The combined effect of adequate provision in all these areas will reduce numbers of unintended pregnancies and halt the spread of sexually transmitted infections as well as creating a society that is well informed, confident and respectful around sexual health issues.

- **How will your party support increased funding of family planning and GUM clinics so as to make these services more accessible to users?**
- **How will your party support a health care system that meets the particular needs of women at all stages of their lives and press for women to be involved in the design of such services?**
- **How will your party press for adequate resources for voluntary organisations that provide education, information and support to women, particularly young women, on sexual health and contraception?**

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Women are demanding that politicians work with the relevant groups and agencies to create a society that will no longer tolerate, excuse or ignore domestic violence.

Statistics for Northern Ireland show that during 2002-2003:

- 7,961 women were assaulted in domestic violence incidents
- 85% of domestic violence incidents reported to PSNI were from women
- 17,580 calls were made to the Northern Ireland Women's Aid Helpline requesting advice on domestic violence
- 989 women were accommodated in Women's Aid refuges
- 1,112 children were accommodated in refuges
- 4,451 women used local outreach centres
- 6 women were killed as a result of domestic violence.

What is your party going to do to ensure that any woman or child who needs refuge space and/or support services will be able to access them?

How will your party make sure that increased resources are committed to education and research to prevent the violence and abuse that scars Northern Ireland?

How will your party advocate mandatory training in domestic violence for all relevant personnel?

How will your party work to strengthen both civil and criminal law in order to bring more perpetrators of this insidious crime to justice?



WOMEN'S *Manifesto*



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