

Strengthening Women's Voices in Government

Consultation response

June 2011

Introduction

1. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (the Commission) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Government Equalities Office (GEO) consultation, Strengthening Women's Voices. This response will consider the context of the consultation, the measures proposed by GEO and the challenges and priorities ahead and set out elements the Commission sees as necessary for an effective way forward.
2. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is an independent public body established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The commission is responsible for implementing the legislation on fair employment, sex discrimination and equal pay, race relations, sexual orientation, disability and age. The Commission's remit also includes overseeing the statutory duties on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity and good relations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the disability duties under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.
3. In addition, the Equality Commission, along with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, has been designated under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN Disability Convention) as the independent mechanism tasked with promoting, protecting and monitoring implementation of the UN Disability Convention in Northern Ireland.
4. The Commission's general duties include:
 - working towards the elimination of discrimination
 - promoting equality of opportunity and encouraging good practice
 - promoting positive / affirmative action
 - promoting good relations between people of different racial groups

- overseeing the implementation and effectiveness of the statutory duty on relevant public authorities
- keeping the legislation under review
- promoting good relations between people of different religious belief and / or political opinion.

Context

5. The consultation document recognises remaining and persistent inequalities for women. These include the barriers to women's equal participation in policy and decision making as well as inequalities in employment and the experience of poverty. These are described in the Commission's Statement on Key Inequalities¹ and CEDAW report². The Commission welcomes GEO identification of these as resulting from women's situation throughout the life span and compounded by the impact of inequalities based on other grounds such as race, age, disability and sexual orientation.
6. In Northern Ireland, public authorities have positive duties to promote equality of opportunity and good relations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Section 75). Section 75 requires public authorities to publish an equality scheme which, inter alia, sets out the arrangements the body has for assessing and consulting on the likely impact of policies on the promotion of equality of opportunity.
7. However, the policy and practice of Whitehall departments and other UK wide public bodies has an impact on women's equality in Northern Ireland. While devolution is now complete in the transfer of powers, excepted and reserved matters such as European and international affairs create a complex interaction with an impact on women in Northern Ireland. The principle of parity in social protection, too, is of significance. The Equality Act 2010 includes protections not enjoyed by women in Northern Ireland and the equality structures across Government in Whitehall do not take account of devolution.

Features

¹ Statement on Key Inequalities, ECNI, 2007
[http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/Keyinequalities\(F\)1107.pdf](http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/Keyinequalities(F)1107.pdf)

² CEDAW Report, ECNI, 2008 [http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/CEDAW\(F\).pdf](http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/CEDAW(F).pdf)

8. The Commission welcomes GEO's vision of engagement that is direct, inclusive and transparent. We understand that GEO recognises the importance of rigorous assessment of need, effective policy making in response and transparency with consultees as a foundation of engagement. We also welcome commitment to measures that contribute to networking for the sharing of good practice.
9. GEO sets out four means of engagement for the future – direct engagement, bringing in expertise, looking ahead and a new IT platform. Each is essential in engagement with women and, accordingly, each has its limitations. However, if the full potential of each of these mechanisms is reached on a continuing basis, meaningful engagement will lead to effective policy and decision making. It is also important to recognise that the means of engagement can be more effective when used in concert than when used on their own.
10. **Direct engagement:** GEO will foster direct engagement with departments. In Northern Ireland, as noted above, the means of doing this is set out in departments' commitments in meeting Section 75 requirements. The work of the Northern Ireland departments will, with that of the other devolved administrations, serve to develop a UK wide picture. However, given excepted and reserved powers and parity principles, other UK departments also have a direct influence on the lives of women in Northern Ireland. Significant matters include social protection, immigration, European policy and equality itself. It is not clear how the need for engagement will be met in relation to such issues. We know that the GEO leads a Gender Directors' Network, established in response to calls, including from the CEDAW committee, for a joined up approach.
11. **Bringing in expertise:** The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has established a Gender Advisory Panel (GAP) as a means of pre-consultation. The Commission recognises that GEO has real challenges in scale and diversity in capturing expertise across the UK but the GAP model offers a basic overview and could be used as a base for building expert groups. Such expert groups could be standing bodies or temporary working groups. Other models in the field include the Women and Work Commission and Women's National Commission sub-groups. Any expert group should be mindful of the situation in Northern Ireland and include the necessary

expertise. In addition, it is important that experts from Northern Ireland are not seen only as relevant to Northern Ireland when they may have more broad based expertise to offer.

12. **Looking ahead:** The caveats above apply also to effective horizon scanning. Capturing the experience and insight of women as well as the available and commissioned evidence will be crucial. This is also a factor for the Commission in its future planning. There is also much to be learned from the Northern Ireland departments' work in meeting Section 75 requirements. Departments have prepared and are consulting on an audit of inequalities which will assist them in developing action plans to set out the actions they will take in implementing Section 75 duties. The audits of inequalities are living documents and a rich source to assist in anticipating inequalities.
13. **IT platform:** The Commission notes the extensive consideration that GEO has given to the new IT platform which will be established. It is right that due consideration should be given to new communications systems where they can be of value in making sure women's voices are heard. On the other hand, the limitations in terms of use of IT by older or poorer people are well rehearsed. In addition to the restrictions in generalist cover an IT platform affords, it may not be an effective means of engagement for some specific issues and purposes, for example the recent GEO consultation on prostitution. GEO should also note very particular issues in Northern Ireland in relation to broadband coverage. Large rural areas are without coverage and so rural women, already limited in participation in traditional engagement, are further disadvantaged.

Challenges

14. GEO asks respondents to identify priorities and challenges. The Commission has a broad agenda for work on women's equality. Rather than select from equally compelling needs we would refer GEO to our CEDAW report³ which looks closely at those issues within our role and remit. Many of the issues fall into the two broad themes of women in policy and decision making and public life and women's economic situation. Many other inequalities flow from them. Violence against women is caused by and causes women's inequality. The Commission welcomes

³ CEDAW Report, ECNI, 2008 [http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/CEDAW\(F\).pdf](http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/CEDAW(F).pdf)

GEO's commitment to refreshing and renewing the priorities and challenges with women across the UK.

Way forward

15. We recognise GEO's position that engagement is a process, not an event. We acknowledge the complexity of the challenge of listening to women across the UK. Certain features must be present in a new, transformed engagement with women. Amongst them are: inclusion; understanding of devolution; transparency; an appropriate response.
16. ***Inclusion:*** The Commission welcomes GEO's strategy of using a spectrum of communications measures from IT and social media through to targeting expertise for working or focus groups. The limits of IT based systems are well rehearsed; new synergies generated by different contributors are lost if the focus is too narrow. We look forward to assisting, whether by sharing good practice developed by public authorities in meeting their Section 75 requirements or otherwise to ensure geographical inclusion. We would also remind GEO that, while on the one hand, Northern Ireland women provide a unique insight into Northern Ireland, they can offer expertise and insight relevant across the UK. Indeed, many of the leading national experts come from Northern Ireland.
17. ***Understanding of devolution:*** Work is required across the UK to fully understand and gain from the integrity of devolution and also determine the impact of Whitehall policy in devolved administrations. For example, welfare reform measures are centrally determined and implemented under parity arrangements but are dependent on resources and infrastructure such as childcare delivered by the devolved administrations. Fully understanding and realising the potential of UK wide and devolved policy and decision making for gender equality will be assisted by the work of the Gender Directors' Network and the Inter-Ministerial Group on Equalities.
18. ***Transparency:*** The strengthened voice of women must be reciprocated, resulting in communication which is two way, transparent, refreshed. It must generate impact assessment to identify new, emerging and changing issues with a relevant programme for change.
19. ***Response:*** The exercise of hearing women's voices is valueless in isolation and the listening needs to be met with a

robust response for change. This will require both mainstreaming and positive action; it will use gender equality assessment and gender budgeting mechanisms; and it will be evidence based, outcome focused and monitored for success.

20. These building blocks can be used to develop meaningful participation, the outcome of effective engagement.
21. The Commission looks forward to continuing to work with GEO on these issues and ensuring strong women's voices in Government.

Equality Commission

July 2011