

*View from the Chair, published in the News Letter, Tues 4 March 2014*

*Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commissioner NI*

Later this week we mark International Women's Day, and this year's theme of *Inspiring Change* asks us to challenge the attitudes and structures which continue to marginalise the contribution of women in many aspects of our society.

Just last week a friend was talking to me about one of the many public consultations under way, when she made the following remark. "*Why should I bother to respond as they never seem to listen to the voice of the ordinary women in the street?*" This unguarded comment caused me to reflect on two things.

Women are still underrepresented in board rooms and governance structures. Out of 126 public bodies in Northern Ireland, only 19 have women as chairs and 4 as deputy chairs. Just one third of public appointments are women, and only 1 in 4 of our district councillors.

And yet around two-thirds of people said they would like to see an increase in the number of women in management roles and in elected positions, including the highest office in Northern Ireland, in our most recent survey of the general public.

So why the lack of progress? There can be many reasons for this, but the strictures we place on how and when we do business, and the stereotyped template of management and leadership may have something to do with it.

Of course, participation is not only about asking someone to join in your activity, it is also about finding ways to join with them.

My friend asked "*when will they listen?*" an observation which raised for me at least the difference between listening and hearing.

There is a much-held view that public consultations are merely mechanisms to gather information which is then selectively used to support the case for policy change.

Someone once cynically referred to this as "*policy-based evidence making*".

If we are fully focused on change that is based on the reality and truth of people's lives then we must move from passive listening to active hearing.

Hearing goes deeper than simply recording the words spoken. It should interrogate the reasons behind the words, the life situations they come from and the needs and fears they raise. In brief, hearing is about people and not pronouncements. Hearing requires time and needs to be honest and open. People need to see that what they say matters. Even if it doesn't find its way into the final document, they should know that their views are valued and the reason that they were not taken forward should be explained through a pro-active feedback process. Once this is seen to happen, people will begin to understand that they have the power to influence change.

International Women's Day reminds us of the need to ensure that not just the voice of "*the ordinary woman in the street*" is heard, but all voices, to inspire real change.