



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

Response to: A Sense of Belonging - Delivering Social Change through a Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2014-2024

Issued by: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

September 2014

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WOMEN'STEC
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, which is funded by the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland.

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 working 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 (WCD)
- Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

1.3 The Consortium will be 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 will ensure that there is a continuous two way flow of information between government and the sector. It will ensure 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 organisations.

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

1.4 This response is informed by women’s views and perspectives articulated at consultation engagement events organised at Women’s Centre Derry, WRDA and Greenway Women’s Centre on 12, 13 and 15 August 2014, respectively, which included engagement with ethnic minority individuals. Appendix 1 provides further detail on this engagement.

2. General comments

2.1 The Women’s Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister’s ‘A sense of belonging - delivering social change through a racial equality strategy for Northern Ireland 2014-2024’.²

2.2 Research suggests that the disadvantage and ‘severe’ disadvantage³ associated with the experience of racism and racial inequalities can fundamentally impact individuals’ life choices/chances and well-being, including their mental health.⁴ The actual nature and extent of this impact in the Northern Ireland case, however, is not fully established: neither fully known nor fully explained/understood. This deficit in knowledge and understanding is attributable to an alarming dearth of robust research evidence on racism and racial inequalities in this jurisdiction, particularly

² OFMDFM, ‘A sense of belonging - delivering social change through a racial equality strategy for Northern Ireland 2014-2024’, OFMDFM: Belfast, 2014.

³ A. Wallace, R. McAreavey and K. Atkin, ‘Poverty and ethnicity in Northern Ireland: an evidence review’, Joseph Rowntree Foundation: London, 2013, p.4.

⁴ Ibid., p.41. See, for example, ‘Does racial discrimination cause mental illness?’ A. Chakraborty and K. McKenzie, *The British Journal of Psychiatry* (2002), 180: 475-77. That said, this area of the literature remains underexplored.

quantitative analysis.⁵ Clearly this research deficit renders problematic the Executive's ambition to develop an evidence-informed racial equality strategy.⁶

Nonetheless, there is certainly enough available research and statistical information⁷ to suggest that racism in this jurisdiction is not only persistent but also escalating and that, as such, Executive policies and legislation to date, including the original racial equality strategy,⁸ have proven insufficient to remedially address racism in substantive ways.

From this perspective, the Consortium welcomes this consultation exercise as renewed affirmation of the Executive's commitment to develop policy and legislation aimed at 'tackl[ing] racial inequalities' and 'eradicat[ing] racism'.⁹ That said, we are concerned that the outline proposals contained within the consultation document might *potentially not go far enough* to properly capture and remedially address racist treatment, racial inequalities and their cumulative impact on ethnic minorities' outcomes across all areas of public sphere activity, whether say, in health, social welfare, education, employment or housing.¹⁰

Particular concerns centre around the following interacting issues: the aforementioned absence of a sufficiently robust evidence base to inform the proposed strategy and implementation plan; the imperative to take account of multiple identities in further developing the strategy; the requirement to integrate into the strategy the notion of enhanced accountability, robust

⁵ The substantive point here is this: '*robust research* that measures the extent of poverty among people from minority ethnic groups and how their experiences compare with other groups, within Northern Ireland or with the rest of the UK or the Republic of Ireland, *is largely absent*'; Wallace, McAreavey and Atkin, op. cit, p.24

⁶ OFMDFM op. cit., p.18.

⁷ For example, according to recent research, there was a significant rise in racist incidents in Northern Ireland between 2012-2013 and 2013-2014: 982 racist incidents were reported in 2013-14, compared to 750 in 2012-2013; NICEM, 'Annual human rights and racial equality benchmarking report 2013-14', NICEM: Belfast, 2014, p.18. See also, NIHRC, 'Racist hate crime, human rights and the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland', NIHRC: Belfast, 2013.

⁸ OFMDFM, 'Racial equality strategy for Northern Ireland 2005-10', OFMDFM: Belfast, 2005.

⁹ OFMDFM, 'A sense of belonging', op. cit.

¹⁰ Wallace, McAreavey and Atkin, op. cit

monitoring and substantive action plans; and, the urgent need for law reform to take account of the anomaly whereby legislation on racial equality in Northern Ireland *has 'lagged behind that in the rest of the UK'*,¹¹ as a result of which black and minority ethnic (BME)¹² individuals in this jurisdiction have less protection from racial harassment and victimisation than their counterparts in Great Britain.¹³

Participants in the focus group engagement articulated these concerns and raised associated misgivings, as will be shown in the remainder of the paper.

3. Specific comments

Research evidence base

3.1 As noted, there is a worrying dearth of reliable disaggregated ethnic data on the everyday experiences of ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland, including the precise nature, extent and impact of their experiences of racism and racial inequality. For example, as recent research from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission affirms, the under-reporting of racist hate crimes by victims remains 'commonplace' in Northern Ireland.¹⁴ And, to make matters worse, departmental data about people from minority ethnic backgrounds is 'incomplete'.¹⁵

little, if anything, is known about ethnic minorities' outcomes in relation to health, education, housing and benefit receipt ...attitudinal data exists but determining the relative extent of racism in Northern Ireland society is difficult.¹⁶

As recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation analysis of the Northern Ireland case emphasises, research deficits of this kind undermine the potential for meaningful and effectual policymaking in racial equality, defined as properly

¹¹ A. Wallace, R. McAreavey and K. Atkin, 'Poverty and ethnicity in Northern Ireland: summary', Joseph Rowntree Foundation: London, 2013.

¹² As understood here, BME entails migrants, asylum-seekers, immigrants and refugees who may also be Caucasian. M. McWilliams and P. Yarnell, 'The protection and rights of black and minority ethnic women experiencing domestic violence in Northern Ireland', NICEM: Belfast, 2013, p.5.

¹³ ECNI, 'Racial equality - policy priorities and recommendations (key point briefing)', ECNI: Belfast: 2014.

¹⁴ NIHRC, *op. cit.*, p.63.

¹⁵ Wallace, McAreavey and Atkin, 'An evidence review', *op. cit.*, p.29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.51.

informed, evidence-based policymaking. In large part, this is obviously because evidence-informed policymaking better enables the development and implementation of strategies and services that recognise and take account of the diverse experiences and needs of different kinds of cohorts and groups.

The document outlines the Executive's intent to develop a robust strategy and programme of work that 'take full account of ... [research] evidence'.¹⁷ But if existing evidence is piecemeal due to the incompleteness of available data,¹⁸ then the Executive will be thwarted in its attempt to realise this ambition, and any subsequent strategy and plan of work will consequently be less meaningful and robust. In the absence of sufficiently detailed disaggregated ethnic data 'the situation of disadvantaged ethnic minorities cannot be ascertained but only *gestimated*'.¹⁹ And, as the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (hereafter, NICEM) has observed, this means that the Executive is intent on proceeding by relying on a research base '*not reflective of the current context*'.²⁰

So as things stand, there is insufficient research to enable the development of a properly informed strategy. The question remains of whether the consultation document proposes enough remedial action to effectively tackle both this research deficit and its potential adverse implications for policy planning and implementation. If government wants to enhance how service planning and delivery take account of racial equality, then it should sponsor *sustained, comprehensive* disaggregated ethnic minority data monitoring *across the entire public sphere*, as appropriate.

Recommendation

The Consortium recommends that the Executive commit to *comprehensively* addressing the existing knowledge deficit on ethnic minorities' everyday experiences, with a view to ensuring that future policy development in this

¹⁷ OFMDFM, 'A sense of belonging op. cit., p.18.

¹⁸ Wallace, McAreavey and Atkin, op. cit

¹⁹ Quoted in ECNI, 'Racial equality', op. cit., p.41.

²⁰ NICEM, 'Consultation on a racial equality strategy – call for support', NICEM: Belfast, 2014, p.1.

area is *properly informed by a robust, continuously maintained and ultimately clear evidence base*. To help facilitate a more effective and meaningful strategy, the intended evidence-based, outcome-oriented approach should be accompanied by robust action plans and accountability mechanisms, to include a significant emphasis on positive action.

Law reform, multiple discrimination and gender equality

3.2 The document outlines the Executive's commitment to address multiple identities and multiple discrimination²¹ as it progresses the strategy. While the Consortium welcomes this commitment, we are concerned that, in the absence of requisite law reform on racial equality, the strategy will prove ineffectual in attempting to take account of multiple identities/disadvantage.

Reported experience

Research affirms that BME groups in Northern Ireland can experience different kinds of multiple or hybridised discrimination, i.e. discrimination on more than one equality ground, such as race *and* age.²² Participants across the focus group engagement were particularly concerned about multiple discrimination and associated multiple disadvantage experienced by BME women, citing both anecdotal and firsthand accounts of instances in education, employment and health, comprising both subtle and overt forms of mistreatment.

These reported experiences were characterised in terms of barriers to accessing services and inclusion, affecting migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees, associated with the following: the use of language; cultural insensitivity; cultural stereotyping; prejudicial attitudes; snubs; and, racist abuse. These experiences were depicted as encompassing the cumulative adverse impact of such interacting factors as: inequalities in benefit receipt and lack of adequate benefit information; lack of cultural awareness; rural and

²¹ Incidents of multiple discrimination occur 'when a person is treated less favourably because of more than one equality ground', ECNI, 'Racial equality', op. cit., p.7.

²² See, for example, McWilliams and Yarnell, op. cit.; also, FRA, 'European Union minorities and discrimination: survey data in focus report - multiple discrimination', FRA: Wien, 2010. Available at: http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/1454-EU_MIDIS_DiF5-multiple-discrimination_EN.pdf

social isolation; the relationship between racism and sectarianism; under-employment/unemployment; lack of appropriate classroom support for ethnic minority children; racist school bullying; lack of women-only advice/support provision, including childcare support; non-recognition by employers of educational qualifications gained in certain jurisdictions; and, lack of economic independence and associated poverty. This claim-making also included anecdotal exploration of the particular and additional barriers to inclusion and accessing services that can be experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and disabled BME individuals.

From this perspective, participants underlined the importance of sustaining free service provision for BME women in women's centres, including free childcare provision to facilitate participation in education/training by migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees. This was viewed as particularly important in light of benefit restrictions and advice/support limitations affecting these cohorts.

Legal anomaly

Yet worryingly, legislation on racial equality in Northern Ireland does not adequately provide for multiple discrimination and, in this sense, '*lag[s] behind that in the rest of the UK*'.²³ International human rights monitoring bodies have highlighted the problem and its implications for rights compliance, making the social justice case for multiple discrimination provisions to be included in equality legislation in Northern Ireland.²⁴ Notably, the latest United Nations' report on the United Kingdom's record on women's rights from the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has highlighted this ongoing anomaly, restating the human rights case for government action to remedially address same.²⁵

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (hereafter, ECNI) has duly called for multiple discrimination provisions to be included in equality

²³ Wallace, McAreavey and Atkin, 'Summary', op. cit

²⁴ See, for example, CEDAW, 'Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland', UN: Geneva, 2013.

²⁵ Ibid.

legislation, providing increased protection for individuals against racial discrimination and harassment: ‘this legislative gap exists across all equality strands, we recommend provisions to prohibit multiple discrimination are introduced across all equality grounds, including race.’²⁶ This has been accompanied by a call for revision to the fair employment legislation, requiring registered employers in Northern Ireland to collect monitoring information in respect of nationality and ethnic origin.²⁷

This appeal is ultimately aimed at strengthening the rights of individuals in Northern Ireland against racial discrimination and harassment ‘*as employees, customers, pupils in school, tenants, as members of private clubs and as students in further and higher education*’.²⁸ The Consortium endorses this appeal.

Participants at the focus group engagement reinforced this ECNI case, calling for the Executive to strengthen the rights of individuals in Northern Ireland against racial discrimination and harassment across *all* areas of the public sphere, including in employment, social welfare, education and health. To supplement this manoeuvre they also appealed for improved staff training across all public bodies to take better account of multiple identities in policy planning and implementation, including direct service delivery. There was also an identified need for further awareness training for service delivery agents in the voluntary/community sector, particularly against the current backdrop of increased partnership working between that sector and the public sector through commissioned services, for example, specialised women-only services. Examples cited of good practice on this front included awareness raising initiatives from Belfast City Council on hate crime and migrant experience.

²⁶ ECNI, ‘Strengthening protection against racial discrimination: recommendations for law reform: full report’, ECNI: Belfast, 2014, p.38.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p.1.

Recommendation

The Consortium urges the Executive to take seriously multiple identities in the delivery of public services and beyond, by instituting such law reform on racial equality as would provide for multiple discrimination, proffering enhanced statutory protection to individuals against such mistreatment across all areas of the public sphere. In addition, the strategy should take proper account of all pertinent international human rights obligations as well as the ECNI's revised guidance on Section 75 compliance.

Poverty, sectarianism and racism

3.3 Research suggests that the experience of racism and racial inequalities in Northern Ireland is impacted by a relationship between racism, sectarianism and poverty.²⁹ Participants at the focus group engagement highlighted this relationship and anecdotally reported on its cumulative adverse impact on the everyday lives and well being of BME cohorts across Northern Ireland.

For example, participants posited an association between race hate crime and sectarianism, compounded by the experience of poverty associated with increases in racial tension and unemployment, which were attributed to the economic downturn. In mapping this relationship, they highlighted such poverty risk factors as the incidence of disability and lone parenthood.

From this perspective, participants articulated additional concern at actual/projected increases in poverty, including child poverty and in-work poverty, and the prospect of further vulnerability among BME individuals associated with extended austerity, fiscal constraints and associated public expenditure cuts, including proposed welfare reform.

The document acknowledges the complexity of the relationship between racism, sectarianism and poverty. However, that complexity remains critically 'underexplored'³⁰ in the literature, resulting in a significant knowledge gap in this area of research. And, for reasons already outlined, research deficits of

²⁹ Wallace, McAreavey and Atkin, 'An evidence review', op. cit

³⁰ Ibid., p.38.

this kind are worrying precisely because they jeopardise the potential of the Executive to develop a properly-informed, evidence-based and, in consequence, more effectual and meaningful strategy.

The complexity of this relationship between racism, sectarianism and poverty was touched upon across the consultation events. Some participants reported the prevalence of a perception, among individuals in disadvantaged areas from the so-called 'long-established *majority* ethnic communities',³¹ that the Executive's entire strategic approach to racial equality was fundamentally flawed. On this view, far from promoting 'good race relations and social cohesion', government policy to date had in fact exacerbated division and racial tension, reinforcing an 'us' and 'them' mentality of resentment between the 'ethnic majority communities' and BME groups: 'because the balance was towards ethnic minorities it was felt that [this equality approach] in effect discriminated against those native to this country' (Greenway Women's Centre focus group). It was posited that socially disadvantaged individuals from these majoritarian communities often 'felt discriminated against in favour of ethnic minorities regarding in particular education and housing' (Greenway Women's Centre focus group).

Examples given to illustrate this claim-making included the issue of apparently overcrowded classrooms in disadvantaged areas of Belfast that include ethnic minority children. It was asserted that in some of these localities parents from the pertaining majority ethnic community have tended to resent the allocation of additional resources to take account of the learning needs of these children, claiming that '*their own* children were excluded from schools in favour of ethnic minority children and ... that this in effect *was an inequality towards their own*' (Greenway Women's Centre focus group).

Motivated thus, some participants complained that 'not enough was being done to stem the influx of immigrants' into Northern Ireland (Greenway Women's Centre focus group), and that 'having come out of an extended

³¹ Ibid, p.8.

period of civil unrest – government should be sensitive to the needs of their own before adapting everything in favour of those coming into this country’ (Greenway Women’s Centre focus group).

Participants at other focus group events called for remedial government action to identify and address any such majoritarian resentment and fears about public sector accommodation of ethnic minority need, specifically the impact of immigration on resource allocation in already disadvantaged areas: ‘there is also a need to work and address the fears of local populations... people’s anxieties about change combined with a lack of accurate information can lead to myths arising’ (WRDA focus group).

Recommendation

The Consortium urges the Executive to address the research deficit on the nature and extent of the relationship between racism, sectarianism and poverty in the Northern Ireland case, ensuring that the development of the strategy is properly informed by an evidence base that takes full account of all relevant disaggregated ethnic data impacting this relationship.

4. Conclusion

It has been suggested that law reform is urgently needed to take account of racism and its adverse impact on the everyday lives and well being of members of BME groups in Northern Ireland, proffering enhanced protection to individuals against racial discrimination and harassment, including multiple discrimination.

Experiences of racism may interact with and be compounded by other constraining experiences such as that associated with poverty, sectarianism and rural isolation. To properly identify and address this complexity, enhancing the prospect of a more effective strategy, the Executive should attend to the chronic research deficit in this area, to include a commitment to enhanced disaggregated ethnic data collection and monitoring/accountability mechanisms across the public sector. For the sake of a more meaningful strategy, this evidence based approach should also be accompanied by

robust action plans consistent with all pertinent international human rights obligations, as well as the ECNI's revised guidance on Section 75 compliance.

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Appendix 1
Women's Regional Consortium: Focus Group Events
OFMDFM's 'A sense of belonging - delivering social change through a
racial equality strategy for Northern Ireland 2014-2024'

Focus group locations and dates

- Women's Centre Derry, 12 August 2014
- WRDA, Belfast: 13 August 2014
- Greenway Women's Centre, Belfast: 15 August 2014

Participants' profile summary

- Overall composition: included some venue staff, board members, volunteers, service users and, more generally, women living and working in different localities, across the NGO, public and private sectors, including parents, young and older people as well as ethnic minority individuals
- Localities represented: Belfast, Ballymena, Portglenone, Ballycastle, Moira, North Down and Ards, Ardglass, Dungannon, Coalisland, Rostrevor, Fermanagh and Derry
- Ethnic minority women originally from the following states: Puerto Rico, USA, Iran, Columbia and Kenya