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

Response to: Programme for Government Consultation Document

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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, the Women's Consortium or, simply, the Consortium), 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 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 further 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 organisations.

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 can ultimately result in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

1.4 This paper revisits the substantive concerns set out in the Consortium response to the consultation on the first draft programme for government, examining whether these concerns have been addressed in the second draft. The paper is as such informed by women's perspectives articulated in engagement in respect of the previous response, reflecting the views of the regional membership bases of the Consortium partners.

2. General comments

The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the executive's 'Programme for government consultation document'.²

In a context of extended austerity, compounded by Brexit-generated socio-economic, political and legal uncertainty, including uncertainty over the future of extant rights protections³ and projections of further financial hardship⁴ for the vulnerable, the Consortium remains profoundly concerned about the question of social justice and gender equality for vulnerable female cohorts in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland, both in the current mandate and beyond.

² Northern Ireland Executive, 'Programme for government consultation document', NIE, Belfast: 2016.

³ On this, see, for example, A. Dannreuther and A. Wagner, 'What Brexit would mean for human rights', Rightsorg [Online]. Available at: <http://rightsinfo.org/brexit-mean-human-rights/> See also, M. Evans, 'What Brexit means for our human rights', The Justice Gap. [Online]. Available at: <http://thejusticegap.com/2016/06/brexit-means-human-rights/> Finally, see, T. Lock, 'What does Brexit have to do with human rights?' OUP. [Online]. Available at: <http://blog.oup.com/2016/06/brexit-human-rights-law/>

⁴ See T. Helm and P. Inman, 'Theresa May's 'just managing' families set to be worse off', *The Observer*, 29 October 2016. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/29/theresa-may-just-managing-families-worse-off-brexit>

As is well-documented,⁵ the agency, well being and life chances of such vulnerable cohorts can be profoundly constrained by different kinds of marginalisation, exclusion and poverty, including both in-work poverty and that affecting workless households.⁶ Unfair cultural-structural gender inequality that cuts across the private and public spheres continues to fundamentally contribute to this gender vulnerability; and, ongoing austerity has complicated this picture of cultural-structural injustice precisely by adversely impacting women and the most vulnerable disproportionately.⁷

Consortium concern about the question of social justice and gender equality for such cohorts was set out in its submission to the first consultation on the draft programme. As previously noted, this paper revisits that concern, exploring whether the substantive issues on which it was predicated have been addressed in the second draft. It will be shown that while the latter addresses some of these issues to some extent, it fails to properly address others. Crucially, the latter includes a failure to explicitly integrate into the programme the kind of gender perspective that research suggests might best help policymaking substantively improve life outcomes for the kind of vulnerable cohorts at hand.⁸

The second draft programme is, of course, framed with explicit reference to the norms of equality and wellbeing, expressed as intent to ‘deliver improved wellbeing’ and address ‘key inequalities’,⁹ and we welcome this intent. Yet, meaningful realisation of this intent in respect of the vulnerable cohorts at hand will intrinsically rely on the extent to which government can deliver *substantive* remedial change to the gender inequality underlying their

⁵ See, for example, B. Hinds, ‘The Northern Ireland economy: women on the edge? A comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the financial crisis’, WRDA: Belfast, 2011; also, H. McLaughlin, ‘Women living in disadvantaged communities: barriers to participation’, Women’s Centres’ Regional Partnership, Belfast: 2009.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ J. Portes and H. Reed, ‘Austerity has hit women, ethnic minorities and the disabled most’, *The Guardian*, 31 July 2014. See also, for example, Fawcett Society, ‘The impact of austerity on women, policy briefing’, Fawcett Society: London, 2012; and, Scottish Government, ‘The gender impact of welfare reform’, Scottish Government: Edinburgh: 2013.

⁸ See S. Quinn, ‘Equality responsive budgeting’, ECNI: Belfast, 2013.

⁹ Northern Ireland Executive, op. cit.

vulnerability, i.e. the kind of change which, as the recent review of the current gender equality strategy demonstrated, successive devolved administrations have failed to deliver in the jurisdiction.¹⁰

The programme for government mechanism under review potentially represents a significant opportunity for government to begin to attend to this failure, particularly since it is expressly 'about making people's lives better'.¹¹ Lamentably, however, as already implied, as with the first draft programme, the second appears to omit the kind of gender policy perspective that research suggests might best allow government to maximise this opportunity to pursue gender equality and so substantively improved women's wellbeing. The omitted perspective entails *a suitably robust gendered analytical approach encompassing comprehensive gender budgeting properly supported by all relevant gender-disaggregated data, which explicitly promotes improvement in equality of opportunity and outcome between men and women precisely by measuring outcomes to ensure results across gender categories.*

The remainder of the paper will elaborate on this dilemma, revisiting the following issues raised in the first response:

- (i) the need for the programme and associated action plans to explicitly provide for the contribution of gender equality to economic growth;
- (ii) shortfalls in gender disaggregated equality data, which threaten to undermine effective evaluation, monitoring and review of progress made under the programme;
- (iii) social protection under the programme for vulnerable cohorts disproportionately affected by ongoing welfare reductions, following expiry of approved short-term mitigation of welfare reform;

¹⁰ It was 'judged' that, across all departments, only 37 out of the 126 outcomes or 'action points' in the applicable 2008-11 gender equality action plans had been achieved, equating to 29 per cent. OFMDFM, 'Gender equality strategy 2006-2016 review', OFMDFM/NISRA, Belfast, 2013.

¹¹ Northern Ireland Executive, op. cit.

(iv) the lack of robust interventionism to address the childcare dilemma in deprived and rural areas associable with women's lack of economic participation and financial independence; and,

(vi) the need to ensure the developed model remains inherently rights compliant.

3. Specific comments

3.1 Gender equality perspective and data shortfalls

The Consortium response to the first draft programme made a social justice case for enhanced gender disaggregated data to support more effective gender analysis across the wider outcome/indicator/measure/action plan model and, in consequence, more effective promotion of gender equality.

We therefore note with particular interest that the second draft sets out a government commitment to ensure that 'where gaps in data for equality groups exist, [these] will be addressed'.¹² We are, however, disappointed with the qualification of this commitment, since it is made quite clear that government will only seek to attend to these data gaps in its outcomes based programming 'wherever possible',¹³ *as opposed to wherever necessary, i.e. consistently.*

This qualification is puzzling since the rationale underpinning outcomes based modelling suggests that preservation of the integrity of such modelling is fundamentally contingent upon *guaranteed access* to the kind of data required to properly measure progress against all intended outcomes/indicators. The recent review of the current gender equality strategy indicated how promotion of gender equality in the jurisdiction under previous devolved administrations was inherently undermined by a distinct government failure to attend to significant shortfalls in gender disaggregated data.¹⁴ From this perspective, and to prevent the perpetuation of this controversy under the finalised

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ OFMDFM, op. cit.

programme, we would urge government to commit to attending to all data shortfalls in relevant gender disaggregated data *wherever necessary*.

Recommendation

The Consortium recommends that the executive take seriously the social justice case for integrating a robust gender equality perspective across its wider indicator/measure/action plan model, ensuring therein that it addresses any shortfalls in gender disaggregated data that might threaten to undermine the effective and meaningful promotion of gender equality across all eventual interventionism.

3.2 Austerity and social protection for the most vulnerable

As with the first draft programme, the second includes an outcome that is essentially about 'helping and caring for the most vulnerable in our society'.¹⁵ Addressing this outcome in a context of extended austerity and Brexit-associated projections of further financial hardship for the poor,¹⁶ the Consortium response to the first draft appealed for enhanced social protection for vulnerable female cohorts in the jurisdiction, both in the current mandate and beyond.

We justified that appeal by drawing on research that evidences the disproportionate adverse impact of austerity on women, as compared to men, and on the most vulnerable.¹⁷ That impact may be partially characterised in terms of the aggravation of pre-existing poverty and the heightened risk of further poverty.¹⁸ The first response also recognised that government has extended some level of time-bound mitigation in respect of that impact including, for example, 'fresh start' welfare reform mitigative measures.

¹⁵ Northern Ireland Executive, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Helm and Inman, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ See, for example, C. Beatty and S. Fothergill, 'Hitting the poorest places hardest: the local and regional impact of welfare reform', Sheffield Hallam University: Sheffield, 2013; J. Ginn, 'Austerity and inequality: exploring the impact of cuts in the UK by gender and age', *Research on Ageing and Social Policy*, 1(1), 28-53, 2013. Also, Portes and Reed, *op. cit.*; M. Aylott et al., 'An insight into the impact of the cuts on some of the most vulnerable in Camden', The Young Foundation: London, 2012; H. Aldridge and T. McInnes, 'Multiple cuts for the poorest families', Oxfam: London, 2014; and, Scottish Government, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

However, in addition, it was pointed out that, as research affirms, when such mitigation ceases affected cohorts can tend to experience increased vulnerability.¹⁹ We subsequently underscored the need for interventionism to safeguard social protection for the most vulnerable *in the period following cessation of any approved time-bound mitigation*. We would reiterate the case for such interventionism.

Recommendation

The Consortium recommends that the executive take seriously the compelling social justice question of social protection under the programme for welfare dependent vulnerable cohorts disproportionately affected by ongoing austerity-associated state income reductions, giving due regard therein to any increases in vulnerability following cessation of any approved time-bound mitigation schemes.

More generally, government should also maintain a holistic and fully integrated approach at the level of strategic policy and service development, implementation, monitoring and review to properly address the cumulative gender impact not only of welfare reform but also any and all other austerity initiatives (both extant and evolving), mapping aggregate equality implications across all section 75 categories while taking into account the differential 'starting positions' of women and men in the public-private sphere nexus. That undertaking should fundamentally rely on (i) the coordinated cross-departmental collation of accurate gender-disaggregated data across all groups of affected women and all affected geographical areas; and, (ii) substantive stakeholder engagement.

3.3 Rural proofing

The response to the first draft programme set out a social justice case for substantive rural proofing of all investment and delivery mechanisms that should fall under the finalised programme and associated action plans. That

¹⁹ For example, research in respect of mitigation to take account of recent changes in state assistance for private sector renters has evidenced significant levels of post-mitigation vulnerability, comprising increases in rent arrears, evictions and homelessness. S. Fitzpatrick et al., 'The homelessness monitor: Northern Ireland 2013', Crisis: London: 2013.

case was spelt out in terms of a normative imperative to attend to the cumulative adverse impact on everyday lives of the enduring legacy of infrastructural underinvestment in rural, and subsequent rural/urban socio-economic indicator differentials,²⁰ which research associates with, inter alia, aggravated isolation, disconnectedness and diminished life chances and outcomes.²¹

Although the consultation document does include some ambitions that broadly address this multi-dimensional rural dilemma, stakeholders and commentators have pointed to an evident danger that the accompanying indicator/measure/action plan model may ultimately prove too restrictive to take due account of the complexity of the interacting factors underlying this dilemma.²² Avoidance of that danger would in large part require government to ensure appropriate rural baselines are in place to assist with effective monitoring, evaluation and review of the proposed programme, to include the addressing of any shortfalls in associated equality data that might threaten to undermine the realisation of an effective and meaningful indicator/measure/action model in respect of rural.

Recommendation

Government should ensure the robust rural proofing of all investment and delivery mechanisms that fall under the finalised programme and associated action plans, taking proper account therein of the enduring legacy of infrastructural underinvestment in rural areas and its adverse impact on the life chances and outcomes of vulnerable cohorts.

²⁰ For example, as the Executive's own research puts it in respect of public sector funding differentials to the wider women's sector: 'compared with levels of government funding to women's groups in urban areas, there was a relatively low level of government funding to rural women's groups'. DSD/OFMDFM, 'Review of government funding for women's groups and organisations', DSD/OFMDFM: Belfast, 2012, p.13.

²¹ See, for example, M. Allen, 'Rural isolation, poverty and rural community/farmer wellbeing - scoping paper', Research and Information Service Briefing Paper, NIA: Belfast, 2014.

²² See, for example, T. Lowe, 'Soapbox: the sorry tale of 'outcome-based performance management'', Slugger O'Toole [Online]. Available at: <https://sluggerotoole.com/2016/07/05/soapbox-the-sorry-tale-of-outcome-based-performance-management/>

3.4 Economic growth, gender equality and women's economic participation: the childcare dilemma

The document restates government intent to prioritise economic growth in the lifetime of the proposed programme and beyond. Despite that ambition, the proposals distinctly fail to take proper account of the contribution of gender equality to such growth. This section revisits and reiterates Consortium concern at this failure set out in response to the first draft, focussing specifically therein on the programme's neglect of the relationship between (i) the potential for economic growth in the jurisdiction and (ii) the gendered childcare dilemma impacting marginalised women in deprived and rural areas.

By 'expanding the stock of human capital, raising labour productivity, improving agricultural productivity and increasing the stock of physical capital', gender equality '*can contribute significantly*' to economic growth.²³ Yet as research affirms, lack of appropriate childcare (accessible and affordable) continues to undermine that contribution in the aforementioned areas, precisely by impeding marginalised women's economic participation in the public sphere,²⁴ as well as their engagement in education/training intended as potential pathways to such participation.²⁵ Put differently, the interacting factors underlying such women's experience of marginalisation and vulnerability includes the relationship between inadequate childcare, gender inequality, poverty and the social division of labour.²⁶ The well rehearsed argument is this: by ascribing to women the social role of unpaid primary carer and domestic labourer in the private sphere, the latter can innately constrain female economic participation in the public sphere, extending dependency on state support and/or partner income and thus increasing the risk of gender poverty while also jeopardising economic growth potential.²⁷

²³ J. Ward et al., 'Evidence for action: gender equality and economic growth', Chatham House: London, 2010, p.xiii.

²⁴ See, for example, C. Lidell, 'The caring jigsaw: systems of childcare and education in Northern Ireland', Save the Children: Belfast, 2009; also, McLaughlin, op. cit.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See, F. Bennett and M. Daly, 'Poverty through a gender lens: evidence and policy review on gender and poverty', Joseph Rowntree Foundation/University of Oxford: London/Oxford, 2014.

²⁷ JRF, 'Reducing poverty in the UK: a collection of evidence reviews', JRF: London, 2014.

In large part, the persistence of this gendered dilemma, of course, speaks to the insubstantial remedial impact that government interventions to date have had in childcare.²⁸ But to compound matters, stakeholders project that further intended intervention under the lifetime of the proposed programme, as outlined in the draft childcare strategy, may extend this trajectory of insubstantiality.²⁹ For example, profound concern has been expressed over the anticipated cessation of the Women's Centres' Childcare Fund, set up by the now defunct Department for Social Development, which provides vital frontline childcare support for deprived, vulnerable women seeking to enter employment and education.³⁰ It is projected that the services the fund helps support could ultimately be discontinued in the absence of alternative, equivalent government interventionism, and it remains to be seen whether such equivalence will be forthcoming.³¹

On this view, if government is serious about doing more to meaningfully engage women in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction as part of its broader socio-economic vision for this mandate and beyond, then it needs to attend to the childcare dilemma at hand in substantive and sustainable ways. *Given that the purpose of the document under review is expressly posited in terms of economic growth, it might reasonably be expected that such interventionism is prioritised.*

Recommendation

In finalising the wider outcome, indicator, measure and action plan model, government should take due account of the childcare dilemma at hand as a substantive and longstanding impediment to improved gender equality and economic growth in the jurisdiction.

²⁸ Ibid. See also, Lidell, op. cit.; and, McLaughlin, op. cit.

²⁹ C. Walsh, 'Response to: delivering social change through childcare: a ten year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare 2015-2025', Women's Regional Consortium: Belfast, 2015.

³⁰ Morrow Gilchrist Associates, 'Evaluation of regional support arrangements for the voluntary and community sector', Morrow Gilchrist Associates: Belfast, 2015.

³¹ Ibid.

3.5 Brexit and human rights compliance

Against a background of variegated Brexit-generated structural uncertainty, including speculation over the future of extant rights protections, the Consortium response to the first draft appealed for due regard for rights compliance across all proposed programme interventionism. This section reiterates that appeal.

Although in the advent of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, the former 'will continue to be [both] bound by' the European Convention on Human Rights and 'subject to' the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights,³² at the same time, 'the protection of these rights *'may [still]...be subject to change* arising out of government plans to consult on repealing the Human Rights Act and replacing it with a bill of rights'.³³ Such change – should it come – would, as implied, ultimately be a matter for the United Kingdom government. However, in the meantime, from a social justice perspective, it remains crucial that the executive make explicit its commitment to international obligations across all policy development and levels, *but particularly at programme level given what is at stake in this debate.*

Recommendation

Government should ensure that the programme mechanism under review remains inherently rights compliant and, to that end, should further ensure explicit acknowledgement and application of this social justice imperative across all policy and service development under associated action plans.

4. Conclusion

It has been suggested that the programme mechanism at hand could potentially represent a significant opportunity for the current government to attend to gendered vulnerability and poverty in deprived and rural areas of the jurisdiction in more effective and meaningful ways than have previous devolved administrations. Yet, it has been argued that in the absence an appropriately explicit and robust gender equality dimension, the proposed

³² Lock, op. cit.

³³ Evans, op. cit.

indicator/measure/action plan model may ultimately prove too restrictive to take proper account of the complex, interacting and often gendered factors underlying this vulnerability and poverty. The case was consequently made for integrating a distinct gender equality perspective across the entire programme, appropriately supported by enhanced gender disaggregated data and equality budgeting, such as might facilitate robust evaluation, monitoring and review. In light of what is at stake in this debate for vulnerable cohorts, we would again strongly urge the government to take seriously the merit of this case.