

Women's ad hoc Policy Group

MANIFESTO

**Westminster
Elections
2010**



INTRODUCTION

The Women's ad hoc Policy Group meets monthly and is comprised of a diverse range of organisations, individuals and trade unions who are concerned with influencing relevant government policies with the aim of promoting gender equality.

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 that these topics 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.

GENDER EQUALITY – INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS

The Gender Equality Strategy and its supporting action plans make reference to fulfilling responsibilities including those under the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

What steps will your party take to meet the CEDAW Committee's concluding observations from the hearing in July 2008? For instance, how will you ensure that NGOs are able to effectively contribute to the implementation of CEDAW (paragraph 26) and what measures will you adopt to increase the number of women in political and public life (paragraph 38)?

GENDER EQUALITY – EQUALITY LEGISLATION

Northern Ireland is held to have been a leader in terms of equality legislation.

Will your party move to bring forward single equality legislation?

What action will you take to compensate for the lost momentum, for example in respect of older women, caused by the stalling of this legislation?

HUMAN RIGHTS - A BILL OF RIGHTS FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

The Women's ad hoc Policy Group responded to the consultation document issued by the Northern Ireland Office, 'A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: Next Steps'. We agree with the Government's assessment that a Bill of Rights which has the support of the people could play an important role in underpinning peace, prosperity and political progress in Northern Ireland.

However, what has been proposed comes nowhere near

what was expected of a genuine and meaningful consultation about the protection of fundamental rights and did not reflect the expressed wishes of the many thousands who have expressed their desire for a strong and inclusive Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. We have let the NI Office know that what they have offered in its consultation document on a Bill of Rights does not come close to what is required, either by the Government's international human rights obligations or under the terms of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. In particular it fails to address and redress the historic and current disadvantages and rights violations facing women within Northern Ireland.

Will your party support the introduction at Westminster of a strong and inclusive Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland?

Will this support include the following specific rights for women and girls:

- *the right to be free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence*
- *provisions to address the persistent under-representation of women in decision making across all levels of society*
- *freely available reproductive healthcare?*

Will this support include the adoption of provisions on social and economic rights to be progressively realised within available resources?

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN - NO RECOURSE TO PUBLIC FUNDS QUESTION

Women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) are being denied access to safe refuge accommodation because refuges are dependent on government funding. These women are not eligible for benefits, such as housing benefit whilst in refuge, and prohibited from employment. As such, non-UK national victims of domestic and sexual violence are essentially trapped,

faced with an impossible and inhumane choice between destitution and a life of violence and abuse.

In these cases women who have experienced domestic and sexual violence are left financially dependent for their survival on their abusers, e.g. their partner, family member/s, employer or trafficker.

More women with NRPF escaping domestic violence will face homelessness, sleeping rough, hardship and complete poverty. They are also at risk of losing their children as they have no means to support them. At worse women may be murdered if they are left with no choice but to stay in an abusive relationship.

Women's Aid is willing and committed to providing support, emergency accommodation and assistance for all women and children who are victims of domestic violence however they are severely limited in their capacity to do so due to a lack of funding and resources.

How will your party ensure that women with no recourse to public funds, who have experienced domestic and sexual violence, have access to emergency accommodation and support in Northern Ireland, and that this is properly resourced?

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN - BARRIERS TO JUSTICE: ACCESS TO LEGAL AID

It is our belief that it is a fundamental human right for women and children to live free from the threat of domestic violence. Where this violence is being perpetrated we believe that it is society's responsibility to take action to protect the victim and bring the perpetrator to justice.

We are deeply concerned at the cost of access to justice for women who experience domestic violence in Northern Ireland.

In seeking a non-molestation order for example, the initial ex-parte order can **cost up to £400**.

Within two weeks the pursuit of a full non-molestation order can cost **a further £400 or more**.

For the many women who are unable to access Legal Aid, these costs can be prohibitive and an additional, unsustainable financial burden at a time of enormous fear and uncertainty.

We urge an immediate amendment to the Legal Aid rules with an automatic right given to all victims of domestic violence to access legal protection and justice free of charge.

How does your party intend to address the issue of Legal Aid provision for victims of domestic violence to ensure access to justice?

WOMEN AND WORK

Although there are more women in paid work in Northern Ireland than ever before, the world of work is not a 'level playing field' for women. In 2010, the labour market remains segregated along gender lines with women concentrated in certain work sectors and in part-time and often low paid employment. Moreover as women continue to shoulder the majority of caring responsibilities in the domestic sphere, necessary support mechanisms such as high quality, affordable, accessible and age appropriate childcare provision is absent across Northern Ireland.

How will your party ensure that the contribution women make to the economy through paid and unpaid work is valued?

Welfare Reform legislation is continuing to roll out affecting many people across the regions. By the end of 2010, lone parents (90% of whom are women) whose youngest child is 7 will be required to actively seek work. Current proposals being debated in the NI Assembly go further and suggest that lone parents whose youngest child is 1 will be required to undertake activities that will enable them to progress towards work. It is proposed that this parity legislation be implemented in Northern Ireland in the absence of necessary childcare provision. In England and Wales the 'Childcare Act' (2006) creates a statutory duty on local authorities to meet the demand for childcare.

How will your party ensure that the current Welfare Reform legislation will not be introduced to Northern Ireland to the detriment of parents (particularly lone parents) who do not have access to affordable quality childcare to enable them to return to work?

Does your party acknowledge the huge amount of unpaid childcare older women in particular provide within their extended families and do you agree that older women should be supported and perhaps remunerated for this work?

WOMEN AND POVERTY

Women suffer discrimination in the economic as well as the political, civil, social and cultural spheres of life.

Women are more economically disadvantaged than men. For example, women are more likely than men to be in low paid, part time work. 38% of female employees in Northern Ireland are in part time or temporary employment compared to 8% of male employees. The

recession has impacted on women, with female employment levels in NI falling by 4.5% in the year up to September 2009. Furthermore, much of women's labour is unremunerated - the Fawcett Society has calculated the value of women's unpaid labour to the economy in the UK, making a contribution of £87 billion a year.

The issue of access to credit under reasonable terms has also been a large feature of the recession. This is a particular problem for women as research has shown that female lone parents are amongst the groups most likely to be financially excluded. Often those on the margins of financial exclusion cannot access credit from mainstream lenders, and so have to turn to higher cost alternatives such as doorstep lending.

The economic inequalities during working life also carry over to retirement. According to the Fawcett Society, there are approximately 2 million pensioners living in poverty in the UK, of which the majority are women. At present in Northern Ireland the NISRA figures estimate that around 19,000 women, compared to 9,000 men are 85+ in Northern Ireland.

How will your party ensure that women who are most at risk of poverty such as pensioners, ethnic minority women and single mothers, are protected during the economic recession?

How will your party ensure that women, particularly those in a disadvantaged position, will have reasonable access to low-cost credit?

How will your party ensure that any cuts in public spending on benefits or public services do not disproportionately impact on women?

How do you propose to ensure affordable relevant services to ensure older women have the opportunity for independence and to live in their communities for as long as possible?

WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Although women in Northern Ireland have played a major role in peace building and policy development at community level there has been little or no recognition of this in the new structures emerging in Northern Ireland in this time of post-conflict. The commitment by the UK government to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325, especially in decision-making roles, has not been evident for women in Northern Ireland.

Women account for only 32% in public appointments with just 19% as chairpersons. At political level women represent only 15% at present out of 108 MLAs in the NI Assembly. At local council level only 22% of Councillors are female and, of those involved in the Review of Public Administration Transition Committees, only 16%. Also, there has never been a female high court judge in Northern Ireland.

How will your Party work to ensure UN Security Council Resolution 1325 is fully delivered in Northern Ireland to increase women's participation in decision-making roles?

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