

Initial report from the women's working group (5th December 2007, Aileen McColgan)

The process to date

Meetings were held on 11th October, 8th November and 28th November.

11th October meeting

1. At the first meeting it was noted that one member still had to be appointed to the group, and that this would probably be a male member from the trade union sector. The meeting was attended by Kate Lagan (SDLP), Paula Bradshaw (UU), Elaine Campbell (Age Sector), Helena Macormac (Ethnic minorities), Margaret Ward (chair) (Women's Sector), Irene Miskimmon (Women's Sector) and Colin Foley (substitute for Tim Cunningham, CAJ). Apologies were received from Jennifer McCann (SF), Sara Duncan (Alliance), and Aileen McColgan (advisor), whose flight had been cancelled due to fog in London.
2. Because of the absence of the legal advisor it was agreed that meeting would not discuss substantive issues but would agree on procedures for future meetings. Discussion also had about people and groups who should be contacted by members of the working group.

8th November meeting

3. This meeting was attended by Margaret Ward (women's sector) convenor, Eleanor Jordan (women's sector), Shauna Page (University of Ulster), note taker, Colin Foley (observer), Kate Lagan (SDLP), Tim Cunningham (CAJ), Helena Macormac (Ethnic Minorities), Sara Duncan (Alliance), Paula Bradshaw (UUP), Jennifer McCann (SF), Elaine Campbell (Age Concern) and Aileen McColgan (Legal Advisor). Apologies were received from Deidre Nelson (DUP). The meeting was addressed by Eleanor Jordan from the Windsor Women's Centre who gave a very instructive account of issues relating to women living in PUL areas.
4. Aileen McColgan gave a talk on international legal standards and rights relating to women, with particular reference to women in Northern Ireland, based on a detailed paper circulated prior to the meeting. She highlighted the absence from the European Convention on Human Rights (and,

therefore, the Human Rights Act 1998) of a free-standing non-discrimination provision and outlined concepts of direct and indirect discrimination and the role of justification, and the group discussed whether a Bill of Rights would help to bridge any gaps in existing protection.

5. The consensus appeared to be that a Bill of Rights could bridge this gap, and offer more protection to women in Northern Ireland. It was discussed whether a Bill of Rights should contain a free-standing provision on discrimination as well as, possibly, a provision relating to equality/ non-discrimination in the preamble. The question whether such a provision ought expressly to impose positive obligations on the state was discussed as was the scope for positive discrimination. Some discussion was had about the role of social and economic rights in promoting equality for women and it was determined that women's mental health should be addressed in the Bill of Rights. In particular it was noted that, the mental health issues being faced by women coming out of the Troubles has been a neglected area that needs particular attention. Violence against women and, in particular, domestic violence was discussed as were reproductive rights. It was noted that agreement on abortion would be difficult if not impossible but that other issues relevant to the question of reproductive/ sexual health might be subject to agreement. Discussion then followed about areas of possible overlap with other working groups (work-related equality, child-care, women in prison etc) and how to deal with this. It was agreed that the women's working group should look at how male economic inactivity impacts on women lives. The group agreed that because many issues concerning ethnic and minority rights have recently become more visible in Northern Ireland, it might be useful to bring in experts to discuss some of the problems facing immigrant women.
6. Helena Macormac then talked about the problems faced, in particular, by immigrant women, and it was agreed that it might be useful to have some immigrant women talk to the group about the issues facing them in Northern Ireland.
7. The following issues/areas were agreed upon as being for possible inclusion within a Bill of Rights and worthy of further discussion:
 - § Gender-related Violence
 - § Mental Health Needs of Women

- § Reproductive Rights
- § Representation in Public Life
- § Discrimination and Equality
- § N. Ireland as a Male Dominated Society
- § Education

8. It was agreed that NIWEP would present the CEDAW Shadow Report for discussion at the next meeting, and that papers on abortion in Northern Ireland and on human rights standards in the areas listed above would be circulated.

28th November

9. This meeting was attended by Aileen McColgan (Legal Advisor), Margaret Ward (chair), Shauna Page (University of Ulster), Colin Foley (observer), Kate Lagan (SDLP), Helena Macormac (Ethnic Minorities), Paula Bradshaw (Ulster Unionist Party, who attended for the latter part of the meeting), Elaine Campbell (Age Concern), Ann Marie Gray (NIWEP), Maggie Beirne (CAJ, substituting for Tim Cunningham). Apologies were received from Tim Cunningham (CAJ), Sara Duncan (Alliance), Jennifer McCann (Sinn Fein). There was some discussion of the notes of the previous meeting and the absence of any member from the TU sector.
10. Ann Marie Gray from the NI Women's European Platform gave a very informative presentation on the CEDAW Shadow Submission which focused on the particular significance of a variety of CEDAW rights for Northern Ireland. Particular attention was drawn to:
 1. Teenage Pregnancies being the highest in Europe
 2. The number of older women living in poverty
 3. The treatment of immigrant women
 4. Increasing number of women in prison without adequate consideration of the reasons for offending.
 5. Policy and progress on violence against women
 6. Under-representation of women in decision-making
 7. Job segregation and unequal pay
 8. Lack of gender-proofing in policies

9. The committee noted the issue of devolution and expressed concern that the protection of women's human rights would be uneven throughout the UK.
11. After discussion of the report there was a broad consensus that additional areas for consideration by the group included:
- Protection of non-nationals
 - Training/ economic security/ childcare/ caring generally and pensions/ employment
12. There was some discussion of the extent to which these issues were being addressed elsewhere. The group then considered how the key issues identified might be fitted within the proposed Bill of Rights and there was some further discussion of the substantive areas identified and the question of how general or specific any draft rights should be, whether they should be gender-specific in form and whether they should form a specific "women's chapter" or be "mainstreamed" throughout the body of any bill of rights. It was agreed that Aileen would attempt to draft some possible draft rights relevant to the areas considered to date for discussion at the next meeting (9th January 2008).
13. Because of the relatively late start of the women's working group the group is not yet in a position to have agreed any proposals. Nor is it possible to state at this time the degree of consensus which is likely on any particular issues. Consultation would be welcome on all the subject areas highlighted above as of particular concern to the group.

Aileen McColgan
6th December 2007