



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
[date]

Original:

Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-fifth session

22 February -4 March 2011

Item 3 (a) (i) of the provisional agenda*

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women’s equal access to full employment and decent work

Statement submitted by Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform (NIWEP), a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

NIWEP¹ is an umbrella organisation representing women’s organisations, affiliated groups, individuals and observers from across Northern Ireland.

The education of women and girls and their equal access to full employment and decent work is central to progressing gender equality,

¹ Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform – www.niwep.org.uk



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but this is particularly true in conflict and post conflict societies where women's economic independence and their full participation in public life is a pre-requisite for lasting peace and stability.

As elsewhere in the UK, and in many other parts of the world, Northern Ireland has seen significant advances in educational opportunities and outcomes for girls. Women's participation in paid work has increased yet significant inequalities remain in educational and labour market opportunities and outcomes. These include persistent gender pay gap, occupational segregation in employment and training, stereotyping of women's and men's roles and structural barriers which reduce women's access to women's full and equal employment.

The economic recession and the impact of public sector cuts on Great Britain and Northern Ireland have, and will continue to have a negative impact on women's employment.

Barriers to women's equal participation and progression in paid work in Northern Ireland include:

- **Inadequate childcare provision**
- **gender pay gap**
- **occupational segregation**



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- **concentration of women in particular areas of part-time labour market**
- **hidden women in the economy**
- **stereotyping of women and men**
- **inequalities in educational opportunities and how these translate to the labour market**
- **under-representation of women in decision making**

Paid Work

The employment rate for women in Northern Ireland is 61.4%, 4.1% less than in Britain.² There continues to be gender differences in employment between women and men. Women continue to be much more likely to work part-time which impacts on earnings (the most significant pay gap is in relation to part-time employment) and progression opportunities. The number of female part-time jobs has increased by 66% since 1984.³ Much of this growth has been in service sector employment where there was huge growth in Northern Ireland between 1997 and 2007. However, this is a sector which is a low pay sector, often with precarious security for women. It is also a sector which has been disproportionately affected by the economic recession. The decision of women to work part-time is frequently

² Women in Northern Ireland, September 2010 - Department of Trade and Investment (DETI) 2010 http://www.detini.gov.uk/women_in_northern_ireland_2010-3.pdf

³ Ditto

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portrayed by government as a ‘choice’. However there is considerable evidence that women are constrained in their employment opportunities by the lack of affordable childcare (as discussed later) and their unpaid caring work.

Occupational segregation has been a persistent problem of the UK labour market and relatively little progress has been made. Women are significantly under-represented in engineering, building and planning and technology and highly over-represented in health and social care and hospitality and retail sectors (a similar pattern is seen in entrants to higher education courses). Evidence suggests that reasons for this include stereotypical careers and training advice and a stereotypical and limited range of options for girls and women on government training programmes.⁴ Even in areas where there is a predominance of female employees they continue to be under-represented in management and on the boards of companies.

The level of female entrepreneurial activity in Northern Ireland is low. Figures for 2009 record the female level of entrepreneurial activity in Northern Ireland at 2.4% compared to 8% for males.⁵ This is equal to a potential shortfall of 28,000 female owned

⁴ *Still Waiting: The stories behind the statistics of young women growing up in Northern Ireland* Belfast: YouthAction Northern Ireland.2007- McAlister, S., Gray, A. and Neill, G. (2007) Lone Parents Speaking Out – the views of lone parents on employment - Gray and Carragher, (2008)

⁵ Women in Northern Ireland, September 2010 - Department of Trade and Investment (DETI) 2010 http://www.detini.gov.uk/women_in_northern_ireland_2010-3.pdf

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businesses if the rates for women and men were equal. Entrepreneurial activity is particularly low among young women. It is also relatively low among the 45-54 age groups, and in this age band the gap between women in Northern Ireland and those across the rest of the UK is widest.

Childcare

Northern Ireland lags behind Britain in relation to childcare provision and the ratio of childcare places is 1:6.4 compared to 1: 4 in England. The National childcare strategy introduced by the Westminster Government was not introduced in Northern Ireland, nor does Northern Ireland have an equivalent of the 2006 Childcare Act which placed a statutory duty on public authorities to provide childcare. The need for a childcare strategy for Northern Ireland which is comprehensive and adequately resourced has been identified by successive research studies and consultations. The urgency of this need is exacerbated by the introduction of stringent welfare to work policy in Northern Ireland in 2010 which places conditionality on lone parents with a child aged 7 or over receiving social protection benefits to show that they are actively seeking work. In Britain enhanced childcare provision was seen by government as a necessary pre-condition for such legislation.



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Education

Educational outcomes for girls in many areas now exceed those of young men leading to a belief that there are few equality issues. However, educational outcomes are also influenced by other factors such as social class and ethnicity and many young women experience multiple disadvantages and end up in a group of young people not in employment, education or training. Young women in this group have often disengaged from education as a result of teenage pregnancy, caring responsibilities or difficult home lives. Recent research from the Institute for Public Policy Research indicates that overall youth unemployment in the UK stands at 18% of 16-24 year olds, the highest level in 15 years. Their research also found that among 16 to 24 year olds, unemployment is highest for those with no qualifications.⁶ While young men fare worse in general than young women the findings show that worst affected were young women with no qualifications. For these young women unemployment had increased by nearly 18% since March 2008. The Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland estimates that of the 24,000 newly unemployed in Northern Ireland last year, approximately 9,000 (37.5%) were aged between 18 and 24 and when compared to the UK average, youth unemployment is now a bigger problem in Northern Ireland with the rate above the

⁶ Youth Unemployment and the Recession – Institute of Public Policy Research (2010)
<http://www.ippr.org.uk/uploadedFiles/events/Youth%20unemployment%20and%20recession%20technical%20briefing.pdf>



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UK average of 18.0 per cent for July-September 2009.⁷ Figures for Northern Ireland also compare unfavourably with many OECD countries.⁸

Decision Making and Public Life

We would strongly argue that the limited progress in Northern Ireland in relation to equality for women and girls is linked to under-representation and marginalisation of women in decision-making. In the current legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland only 15 out of 108 members are women. Only 22% of councillors in local government are women and fewer than 34% of members of public bodies are women (these bodies are responsible for significant aspects of public administration in Northern Ireland, including health and social care, education and equality).⁹ Research with young women in Northern Ireland identified that they are ‘still waiting for equality’ and feel they have little opportunity to change this.¹⁰ Despite pressure from international bodies, including CEDAW and obligations set out in UNRES 1325 and measures set out in the Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland there has been a lack of concrete measures to address this under-

⁷ Youth Unemployment in Northern Ireland - Jessica Bennett, January 2010 – Economic Research for Northern Ireland - <http://www.erini.ac.uk/Publications/PDF/ERINIMon48Rev.pdf>

⁸ OECD ‘Education at a Glance’, Table C3.2a (www.oecd.org/edu/eag2009).

⁹ Department of Trade and Investment (DETI) Women in Northern Ireland, September 2010 http://www.detini.gov.uk/women_in_northern_ireland_2010-3.pdf

¹⁰ Creating a Shared Society in Northern Ireland: Why We Need to Focus on Gender Equality – Ann Marie Gray and Gail Neill, 2010, <http://yas.sagepub.com/content/early/2010/10/01/0044118X10383548.abstract>



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representation. Even where measures have been introduced, such as the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act this has not been used.

Impact on legacy of Conflict on Young Women

In Northern Ireland the tendency has been to focus on young men in terms of discussion and policies relating to conflict and peace building. Yet, research findings demonstrate that the conflict has had a significant impact on the lives of young women, on their opportunities, and on how they view their communities and society. Implicit and explicit messages passed on to them and living in segregation, fear, and hardship has restricted opportunities and choices in many areas of their lives, including education and employment. However, there have been few opportunities for young women to understand, make sense of, and deal with their experiences of growing up in a country with such a bloody past nor indeed has there been sufficient acknowledgment of, or attention given, to the fact that broader gender inequalities between men and women have exacerbated the invisibility of women and girls. We would recommend that there needs to greater acknowledgement of the impact of the conflict on girls and young women and that much more needs to be done to ensure young women have a voice and are encouraged and equipped to take on leadership positions.

NIWEP recommendation that

- **Addressing the educational disadvantages by groups of girls and young women. This should include measures to tackle under achievement which recognise the root causes of**



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- disadvantage and ensure young women have opportunities through formal and informal education to re-engage with education.**
- **Recognising the contribution of ‘hidden’ women to the economy by addressing negative language such as ‘economically inactive’ and to calculate and recognise the financial contribution women make to the economy in their roles as carers, family businesses and agriculture**
 - **Recognise and address the inequalities created by the fact that women and girls continue to provide substantial unpaid caring work (often as a result of gendered assumptions about women’s roles) and address the financial and other disadvantages resulting from this.**
 - **Close the gender pay gap by strengthening legislation and policies and the implementation of these to ‘fast track’ closing the pay gap between women and men. This should include the introduction of mandatory pay audits and the promotion of flexible working arrangements for men and women.**
 - **Eradicate stereotyping of women and men in particular occupational areas. This should include education and**



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careers advice which is non gendered and encourages girls and women to enter non traditional areas.

- **The provision of high quality, affordable childcare. There is an urgent need in Northern Ireland for a childcare strategy, resourced and with clear implementation targets. Childcare should be recognised as a family issue, not a women’s issue.**
- **Government should commit to ensuring that budget changes in Northern Ireland do not affect women disproportionately.**
- **In providing the opportunities to increase women and young girls’ access to full employment member states need to address the lack of women in decision making and politics**
Increasing women in decision making. This should include the introduction of Special Temporary Measures to achieve this as recommended by the CEDAW Committee in 2008.
Government should ensure compliance with the obligations set out in UNRES 1325.¹¹

¹¹ CEDAW - Concluding Observations to the UK 2008 – Para. 285
<http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N09/555/92/PDF/N0955592.pdf?OpenElement>