

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI)

Response to

**Gender Matters - A Consultation
Document**

**Towards a cross-departmental
strategic framework to promote
gender equality for women and men**

2005-2015

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the umbrella body for the voluntary child care sector in Northern Ireland.

CiNI represents the interests of its 90 member organisations, providing policy, information and support services to members' in their work with children and young people. CiNI has a diverse membership all of whom work with and for girls and boys from diverse backgrounds, many of whom are at risk of or already have acute experiences of disadvantage and marginalisation.

CiNI welcomes this opportunity to respond to OFMDFM's consultation on Gender Matters.

While we are disappointed that girls and boys, and the children's voluntary sector were not involved in the preliminary consultations on the development of Gender Matters we believe that this public consultation exercise provides an opportunity to ensure that gender inequalities experienced by girls and boys are identified and can be addressed as part of the process of delivering gender equality.

We recognise and understand that there have been major concerns expressed by the women's voluntary sector on Gender Matters and we would defer to their expertise in this area and advocate that these concerns are acknowledged and addressed in the final gender strategy.

However, it is our understanding that this strategy has been developed to include girls and boys and our response has been formulated examining the strategy from this perspective.

Inclusion of Girls and Boys

CiNI believes that Gender Matters is extremely unclear in its commitment to the inclusion of girls and boys. There is a lack of consistency in reference to girls and boys, they are clearly absent from the document's title and the key elements of the document e.g. the vision, principles and gender indicators, with reference coming at the point of discussion on the strategic goal and objectives. The document, which considers the position of men and women at Annex 3, is extremely weak in identifying gender inequalities experienced by girls and boys.

These concerns have been further added to as the Children and Young People's Strategy, which is also being developed by OFMDFM in parallel to Gender Matters, is not referenced in the discussion on **government priorities**, and not recognised as having a gender dimension. Yet the Draft Children and Young People's Strategy includes a commitment to ensuring that the rights and needs of children and young people are reflected in the Gender Strategy.

While we wish to see a specific mechanism for child rights proofing of policy developed as part of the Children and Young People's Strategy we would advocate that the Section 75 duty on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity in relation to a number of groups, including children and young people under the 'age' group, must be implemented effectively. This must include direct consultation with girls and boys on Gender Matters, with consideration of the impact of the proposals and mitigating action taken to address any adverse impacts the proposals may have on girls and boys.

CiNI believes that if the Government is serious about addressing gender inequalities between men and women and promoting gender equality that there must be a recognition that gender bias begins from birth onwards and that attempting to identify and address issues in adulthood will be much more time and resource intensive and less likely to succeed, given the failure to intervene early when gender bias begins.

Equality of Opportunity

We accept the concerns of the women's sector that the document is not reflective of the statement in the Ministerial foreword which states that 'gender inequalities remain in many areas of life and they impact mainly to the disadvantage of women.' (p.2)

We share their concerns regarding the interpretation of equality of opportunity and would advocate it does not mean treating everyone the same, but that to get to a point where there is equality of opportunity more specific, additional, positive action must be taken to address the disadvantage which is mainly experienced by women and girls.

However, there are clear inequalities experienced by boys and we feel that these must be acknowledged and addressed appropriately by Government.

Multiple identities

CiNI welcomes the commitment to addressing multiple identity issues. However we are disappointed that this is not reflected throughout the strategy. There is no recognition or consideration of the gender inequalities experienced by multiple identity women and men, and girls and boys.

Annex 3 considers education and career patterns and the differences that still exist in the performance of girls and boys in education, with girls outperforming boys overall. However, we would wish to see consideration given to whether this pattern is replicated for multiple identity girls and boys. For example, anecdotally we recognise the relative underperformance in educational attainment amongst Travellers, yet there limited statistical information available on this issue and therefore no way of assessing educational attainment based on gender.

One of the key actions of the strategy must be to work across the Section 75 groups to ensure that information is disaggregated on the basis of gender for girls and boys.

Gender Matters – Coverage

CiNI would question the coverage of the strategy which goes beyond the gender dimension and includes "our relationship status, whether we have dependents or are carers, and also whether we are transgendered." Firstly, we believe that this dilutes the strategy's core focus on gender. Secondly, it is unclear why these aspects of multiple identity are highlighted as opposed to reflecting the entirety of Section 75 equality groups. We believe that a gender strategy must have a primary focus on gender and flowing from this also consider the full spectrum of multiple identity as encompassed in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Gender Inequalities in Northern Ireland

We recognise that there is an absence of gender-disaggregated data in relation to the multiple identities of women and men and girls and boys and it must be an immediate action area if the strategy is serious about identifying the gender inequalities experienced by **all** women and men and girls and boys, and ensuring gender equality.

We acknowledge that the key action areas are derived from Government's international obligations and would support the key action areas being fully inclusive of all the action areas under these international obligations.

We understand that there will be action planning under these areas and believe that there are gender inequalities in these areas impacting on girls and boys that require early action.

CiNI would recommend that Government refers to the NICCY/QUB research on Children's Rights in Northern Ireland in 2004 which illustrates some of the gender inequalities experienced by girls and boys and provides reference to further more specific and up-to-date research relating to gender.

CiNI supports the application of Gender Matters to all of the Northern Ireland Government Departments and their agencies. We note that crime and community safety is identified as a key action area, therefore we trust that the Northern Ireland Office also comes under the remit of the strategy and would seek clarification on this issue.

We have drawn from the NICCY/QUB report some of the specific gender issues for girls and boys which we believe require specific action under the key action areas that the strategy identifies. However, we would advocate that OFMDFM undertake a comprehensive analysis of the girl/boy issues under all of these areas, drawing from research and direct consultation with girls and boys and their representative groups.

- **Education and lifelong learning (including vocational training)**

We note that Annex 3 considers the differences that still exist in the performance of girls and boys in education, with girls overall outperforming boys. We also note that the education system is endeavouring to ensure that boys reach their full potential at school. Any actions that are being taken by the Department of Education in this area must be explicitly included in the strategy's action plan.

The NICCY/QUB research provided more recent qualitative information on gender and education. The report flagged up key issues including, but going beyond, the focus on educational attainment; and highlighted how gender stereotyping has permeated school policies, for e.g. on school uniform and subject choice, as well as participation in sporting activities. We believe that it is fundamental that gender inequalities experienced by girls and boys are addressed early as clearly gender inequalities in education are at the root of job segregation and career stereotyping. CiNI believes that this underlines the need for positive inclusion of girls and boys in any gender strategy that aims to ensure gender equality for all.

The report, in its consideration of recent research, reiterated some of the key messages coming from primary research – “there needs to be a focus on breaking down traditional gender roles and stereo types and thus creating an environment where boys and girls

have much greater freedom from the constraints that these pose ... and there needs to be further consideration of the various ways that gender issues impact on the classroom in general”(p.141-142). CiNI would recommend that Gender Matters specifically addresses the key issues identified by girls and boys in the report.

- **Housing/Homelessness**

We note that Annex 3 in considering Housing/Homelessness indicates that men are more likely to be homeless than women, although statistics show that there are significant numbers of both.

We would highlight recent NIHE data noted in the NICCY/QUB report which indicates that in 2003-04 there were 328 single females aged 16-18 homeless and 237 single males, in the same age range, homeless.

- **Health and well-being (including suicide)**

We note that Annex 3 in considering Health indicates that death as a result of suicide among young men is around twice as great as that among young women.

We would highlight research by the Rainbow Project noted in the NICCY/QUB report which indicated that gay men were more vulnerable to mental health problems and more likely to commit suicide indicating the need for specialised counselling services (p.98).

We note that Annex 3 also indicates differences in health-seeking behaviour, with fewer men consulting their GP and dentist. We would highlight that there are also very specific issues for multiple identity groups e.g. the NICCY/QUB report noted that ante-natal health care was often not utilised by Traveller women and girls and where they did use the service there was often no follow-up appointment (p.87).

We note that in terms of health behaviours Annex 3 indicates that men are more likely to drink alcohol than women, and we would highlight that this is a pattern which begins with girls and boys. The NICCY/QUB report noted that more boys (60%) than girls (54%) had ever taken an alcoholic drink (p.81).

- **Crime and community safety**

Again we welcome the inclusion of this key action area and trust that this indicates that the remit of the strategy includes the Northern Ireland Office as the body with central responsibility for crime and community safety.

In reference to girls and boys experiences of justice and policing in Northern Ireland we would refer to the NICCY/QUB report as a starting point for gender disaggregated data.

- In the 16-24 age range 56% of young men and 28% of young women reported contact with police (p.177)
- Young men in the 14-17 age range were three times more likely to be stopped and searched by a police officer than were 18 year olds (p.177).

- The number of boys in the criminal justice system significantly out numbers girls. In 2003-04 there were 250 boys in the juvenile justice centre and 19 girls. (p189)
- In relation to detention there is a very serious gender issue for women and girls. While there are serious human rights issues regarding holding girls with adult women, this is further added to by the fact that since June 2004 women and girls are being held in Hydebank Wood which is a male Young Offenders Centre. This is an issue where immediate action is required and in line with the NICCY/QUB report we would advocate the provision of gender specific regimes and programmes for all children in custody (p.190-191).
- Also in terms of fear of crime high proportions of young women in Northern Ireland claimed to be very worried about physical attack (32%) and racial or sectarian attack (19%).
- In relation to the roll out of anti-social behaviour legislation in Northern Ireland we would also highlight the English experience where in some areas as high as 93% of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders issued against under 21 year olds were issued against boys or young men. CiNI believes that immediate action is required so that this experience is not replicated here in Northern Ireland. Furthermore CiNI does not believe that serving ASBOs on girls and boys is an appropriate response to anti-social behaviour. We would advocate that Departments, including the Northern Ireland Office, and their agencies, must engage in partnerships at a local level that include young people, their families and voluntary and community agencies to firstly gain an understanding of the nature and extent of anti-social behaviour in local communities, and the reasons why girls and in particular boys engage in this behaviour and develop specific responses, which may include gender specific programmes, e.g. restorative initiatives and the development of youth spaces.

- **Gender related violence and abuse**

In the area of gender related violence and abuse we believe strongly that there must be a clear and explicit recognition that in 90% of cases women are the victims and men are the perpetrators of violence in the home. Therefore additional specific actions must be targeted towards protection, support and justice for women, with explicit linkages to the Tackling Violence at Home the Strategy for Addressing Domestic Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland.

We would also highlight a specific area which we believe must be recognised by both Tackling Violence at Home and Gender Matters and where appropriate action must be taken. Research has shown that some young people – one in five men and one in ten women – think that violence towards a partner is acceptable in some situations. While it is pre-dominantly an issue on young people's attitudes to be dealt with through Tackling Violence at Home, there is also a gender dimension with more young men holding this belief than young women and therefore this issue must also be addressed in a gender strategy.

A Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland – A proposed framework

Gender Equality Vision

CiNI believes that the vision must specifically include girls and boys. If the vision is to be the 'constant reference point' (Gender Matters, p.35) of the strategy then the failure to include girls and boys will mean that they will be excluded from the out working of the strategy.

The inclusion of girls and boys must be reflected throughout the vision statement, we would therefore advocate that it reflects their circumstances e.g. "in which we can enjoy and share equality of opportunity, rights and responsibilities in all aspects of our lives, and in which we are able to **grow**, live, work and participate to our full potential."

Again we would reiterate our concerns regarding the listing of specific Section 75 groups and we would advocate that rather than listing groups the vision statement should refer to **all** women and men, girls and boys.

Gender Equality Principles

Girls and boys must also be specifically recognised and represented in the gender equality principles.

CiNI would advocate a number of changes to the principles:

- Adopting a positive and proactive approach to identifying, understanding and responding to the needs and choices of women and men, and taking into account the impact of where they live

CiNI believes that "taking into account the impact of where they live" should be removed. While there are clearly specific rural and urban issues, we do not believe that this issue should be singled out at this point, as it again detracts from the focus on gender and excludes other equally important aspects of multiple identity.

- Avoiding the influence of stereotypes in policy development and all decision-making processes.

CiNI believes that this principle could be framed more positively e.g. recognising and addressing the influence of stereotypes in policy development and all decision making processes.

- Promoting a partnership approach in developing effective and inclusive policies and service delivery, whereby departments, agencies, statutory bodies, non-governmental organisations, and voluntary and community organisations can work productively together and share best practice.

CiNI believes that this principle must be firmer in its commitment to a partnership approach e.g. **ensuring** a partnership approach and **joined-up working**.

- Recognising multiple identities of women and men – for example, father, mother, carer et cetera – and taking into account the different impacts that they have on the situations and experiences of women and men.

This principle must also include and be representative of girls and boys and **all** aspects of multiple identity.

Strategic areas of intervention to tackle gender inequalities

CiNI believes that the chosen areas of intervention are not reflective of the lives of children and young people. There must be a clear recognition of the need for gender equality in family life as the starting point of ensuring gender equality in all other aspects of life and in adulthood.

Furthermore consideration of gender-related violence and abuse under the strategic area of gender equality in civic life is a misrepresentation of the issue and therefore inappropriate. We recommend that there is specific focus on gender equality in family life, given that this is the starting point for much gender inequality, and this must include a core focus on gender-related violence and abuse in the home, reflecting that, in the main, this is perpetrated by one partner (usually a man) over another (usually a woman).

Strategic goal and objectives

CiNI notes that it is within the strategic goal and objectives that girls and boys are for the first time included in key elements of the strategy. However, we are disappointed that girls and boys are not specifically recognised within the action areas of the strategic objectives. There are no girl/boy specific actions in these areas.

We believe these must be re-worked as they do not address gender inequalities that exist and fail to recognise, with additional positive actions, that gender inequalities mainly disadvantage women and girls.

Again we would reiterate earlier concerns regarding the listing of certain multiple identities which we believe removes the core focus from gender and operates to the exclusion of other multiple identity groups.

In particular we would like to comment on “promoting effective consultation, communication and partnership working with men and women in the development and delivery of policy and services.” We would highlight OFMDFM’s statutory duty under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to promote equality of opportunity across a number of groups including, under the ‘age’ group, girls and boys. This must include direct consultation with children and young people and to enable effective consultation the production of child-friendly consultation material. We are, therefore keen to hear of the outcome of OFMDFM’s direct consultations on the strategy with girls and boys.

Implementing the Gender Equality Strategy

CiNI is disappointed that there are no plans for inclusive public consultation on the gender equality action plan. Its actions, targets and associated performance indicators

are a crucial element of the strategy and will be fundamental to its overall success or failure in ensuring gender equality.

CiNI notes that there is a commitment to working with “departments, their agencies, the ECNI, and groups and individuals representing women and men to agree gender equality indicators and develop a Gender Equality Action Plan”. Again we would strongly advocate that if Government is serious about including girls and boys in this strategy they, alongside their representative groups, must be involved in this process of developing indicators and the action plan.

CiNI believes that at this point the strategy lacks clarity, fluidity and co-ordination with the introduction of concepts including operational objectives, actions and targets, yet the detail of these is not spelt out to allow commentary.

CiNI would advocate that the five pillars of action are re-worked and developed as positive and pro-active outcome statements, with actions developed to deliver on these outcome statements accompanied by targets and associated indicators.

We note the suggestions for selected equality indicators for Northern Ireland at Annex 8. Again it is difficult to comment on these equality indicators when they are not linked into specific actions. We note the lack of girl/boy centred indicators and overall we would advocate further disaggregation of indicators to reflect the spectrum of multiple identities.

Budgeting for gender equality

CiNI welcomes OFMDFM's PSA target to co-ordinate strategic action to promote equality and social inclusion of people of different gender (Priorities and Budget 2005-08). However we are disappointed that gender budgeting is not being taken forward as part of the strategy. We believe gender budgeting is essential to the full and effective implementation of the strategy and would advocate the Government take forward work on this as a priority so that it can be included as an integral element of the final strategy.

Implementing the strategy – structures and responsibilities

We note that there will be joint ministerial responsibility for implementation of the strategy. We fear that with responsibility spread between a number of ministers there may be no clear, central ownership or commitment to the strategy. We believe that responsibility may be better located with one minister who could spearhead the strategy and co-ordinate implementation.

We note the central role of OFMDFM's Gender Equality Unit in working with departments to take forward the implementation of the strategy and its action plan. We believe that this role must explicitly include a commitment to comprehensive training for all departmental and agency staff on gender equality and the mainstreaming process.

We also note the partnership working in developing the strategy and the further commitment to partnership working in developing the action plan. We believe that this partnership working must be inclusive and representative of all key stakeholders to the strategy, including girls and boys. We would advocate that these partners must also have a clearly defined role in the monitoring and review of the strategy.

Equality issues

Again we believe that in considering the equality issues associated with the strategy that there is an inconsistency in the strategy's commitment to girls and boys as it states that "the Gender Equality Framework Strategy and its subsequent action plan aim to promote gender equality and tackle gender inequalities between women and men generally (including boys and girls)" yet there is limited consideration of available data and research on girls and boys and the multiple identities of women and men, and girls and boys.

CiNI believes that in the absence of such comprehensive data it is impossible to assess the equality issues that arise from the proposals. This information must be sourced and we would advocate that the NICCY/QUB report is a useful starting point and sign post to other relevant information sources.

CiNI believes that the equality impact of the high level elements of the strategy must be considered, and not, as is indicated await agreement on lower level elements of the strategy. We strongly believe that there are already adverse equality impacts for girls and boys given that they are absent from the vision and principles. If adverse impacts of the high level elements of the strategy are not identified and dealt with appropriately there can be little confidence that the lower level operational elements of the strategy will promote equality of opportunity.