

4 Nations Event - 14th June Cardiff

- Thank you for inviting me here today to talk about the work of the Women's National Commission. It's very important to talk to each other about how we can get the voice of women to Government and discuss the ways in which women can have their voices heard, especially to influence change.
- The remit of the WNC is to **'ensure that, by all possible means, the informed opinion of women is made known to Government'**.
- The WNC is an umbrella organisation established in 1969 to advise government on the views of women in the UK. The WNC is an advisory Non Departmental Public Body (NDPB) reporting to the Minister for Women via the Women and Equality Unit. It is fully funded by Government but able to comment freely on government policy. In this unique role, the WNC liaises with, and is consulted by, the Government's Women and Equality Unit as well as other government departments.
- The work of the WNC is steered by a publicly appointed Board which currently, stands at seven Commissioners, All posts are filled through an open selection process, including that of the Chair.
- Commissioners represent views of many key parts of the women's lobby, including some of the larger women's organisations, trade unions, campaign groups, violence prevention groups, ethnic minority women, political parties, grass root organisations, and faith groups. Seats are reserved for women from Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Work of the Commission includes giving expert advice to Government and taking a lead on specific projects, as well as overseeing the WNC strategic direction and work programme.

- I would like to tell you briefly about some of the work the WNC is involved in and give examples of some of the different ways the WNC facilitates women's engagement with Government.

The Violence Against Women Working Group

- One of our biggest and longest running Working Groups is the WNC Violence Against Women (VAW) Group which first met in February 2002. The VAW Group came about because there was not one coherent and cohesive voice to Government on Violence Against Women. The sector was fragmented and the smaller groups had no way to engage in National debate. This Group does that. Professor Liz Kelly, Director of the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) and WNC Commissioner, chairs the Group.
- The working group meets quarterly and currently includes sub-groups of experts who focus on specific fields. There are Sub-groups on Domestic Violence and Sexual Violence.
- Each Group is made up of service providers, academics, grassroots organisations and larger organisations and includes women from hard to reach and excluded groups. For example, only extremely small organisations work in the Female genital mutilation field and the WNC were able to facilitate a close and effective working relationship between those organisations and the Home Office which continues today.
- The VAW Group is a UK wide Group and as such has representation from Wales: Welsh Women's Aid, Cardiff Women's Safety Unit, and Gwendolyn Sterk from the Wales Women's National Coalition. From Northern Ireland: Women's Aid Northern Ireland, Amnesty International UK Northern Ireland: and Scotland:

Marsha Scott from Engender/UK Joint Committee on Women, Central Scotland Racial Equality Council Ltd, Rape Crisis Scotland, Zero Tolerance, Scottish Women's Aid, Shakti Women's Aid, Church of Scotland Guild and the Women's Support Project Glasgow. We always welcome more representation and if you would like more information, do please Email the WNC.

- Representatives from the Home Office, Department of Health, and the Crown Prosecution Service frequently attend Group meetings, giving it a valuable link to Government decision-makers. The Groups provide advice to Government on specific issues, particular areas of concern, they respond to consultations and are consulted on legislation like the forthcoming Forced Marriage legislation. For many organisations, it is the first time many organisations will have sat at the table with Government and have the support of other organisations to enter into discussion.
- This is a two way process, for Government, having the views of a very diverse but representative sector means that Government have access to a very wide-ranging sounding board, very quickly.
- In November 2006, the second '*Making the Grade? An independent analysis of Government initiatives on violence against women*' was published. The report was the second analysis of Government work on VAW and as such provided an opportunity to examine progress on movement towards an integrated VAW strategy. Nearly all Departments fared better than in the 2005 report. Departments that scored particularly well were the Crown Prosecution Service, the Home Office and the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA).
- We are hoping that our Welsh partners will feel able to participate this year with the help of the End Violence Against Women

Coalition Campaign members. (Northern Ireland participated in 2006 for the first time.)

- WNC opened up channels of communication with Government departments through the first *Making the Grade* and have passed on the baton to the leading violence experts in the VAW field who now discuss and advise Government Departments directly on how they might work on VAW. Because of the profile that *Making the Grade* has given VAW over the last eighteen months, WNC have been invited to sit on key inter departmental groups on VAW. The Report has led to Ministerial meetings for example, in March this year, former Chair, Margaret Prosser, Liz Kelly, and Janet Veitch (former WNC Director) met with Harriet Harman and Vera Baird to discuss the Report and the work that could be taken forward by DCA on VAW. The Ministers said that they had found MTG 2006 useful.
- Some examples of the work WNC has facilitated: Home Office came to talk to the Sexual Violence Group on their media campaign on consent in rape cases, the Group wrote an article for the *Sexwise* website for DFES, they had substantial input into the very important Action Plan on Sexual Violence and Abuse which was published in April 2007 and was supported by Ministers across Government.
- In January 2007, members from the VAW Working Group met with Officials from the Equality and Diversity Unit in Department for Communities and Local Government to discuss the Department's Gender Equality Scheme. They also met with the Home Office in March and subsequently with Ministry of Justice and the Cabinet Office.

Muslim Women's Network

- The Muslim Women's Network (MWN) began life as a small group meeting from time to time with the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and Minister for Women, Patricia Hewitt, to act as an unofficial sounding board for a particularly excluded group. In 2003, Patricia asked the WNC to take over support for the group, and to extend the group to make it more representative of a wider range of Muslim women and to mainstream its advisory role across other Government Departments. Whilst Minister for Women, Patricia met with the group regularly.
- The WNC's remit was to facilitate the Muslim Women's Network's engagement with government, the aim being to build their links to government and make key contributions to inclusive community dialogues across the various faith communities that embrace Islam, and to reach the more secular groups within the community. The MWN is particularly focussed on reaching excluded women who have no other voice. Muslim women's organisations are among the most poorly resourced in the voluntary and community sector. The Muslim Women's network had representation from the devolved nations: then Scottish WNC Commissioner, Farkhanda Chaudhry MBE from the Muslim Women's Resource Centre, Scotland, and the All Wales Saheli Association amongst others worked on the project
- In 2005, the WNC secured Home Office funding for a consultation with Muslim Women. The objective was to reach the most excluded women and to bring their authentic voice and opinions to Government, and very importantly, to let them set their own agenda.

- The MWN used their contacts to help WNC reach 200 women from five cities across England. We had hoped the consultations would reach into the devolved nations but Home office were unable to fund this. Five one-day events were held at which women spoke freely about the barriers they face as Muslim women. In addition, small focus group discussions were held for lesbian and transsexual Muslims, and for those suffering from domestic violence and other forms of violence, to enable women who were unable to raise these issues in open forum, to speak.
- The report from this consultation, '*She Who Disputes*' was published last December.
- The Report found that this group had a huge amount in common with other women – for example they came across the same issues surrounding sexism, although other forms of discrimination added to their experiences.
- Patricia Hewitt, Secretary of State for Health, attended and spoke. In February 2007, the WNC Chair and Professor Haleh Afshar, Chair of the MWN, as well as MWN members, met Patricia Hewitt to discuss how to take the health issues identified in the report forward. WNC and Health officials are now discussing doing consultations to look at how Muslim Women's particular difficulties can be addressed.
- As with the *Making the Grade* work, WNC builds capacity and 'float off' a group or a piece of work once funding has been secured and, as we say another *WNC baby is born*. So it is with the Muslim Women's Network and we are hoping to secure funding to enable the MWN to become an independent group.

- An example of another WNC baby born is the Gender Expert Group on Trade. This group was set up at the request of the Minister for Women in 2003. It was made up of academics, and activists, the TUC and the larger women's organisations. It gave advice to DTI on such issues as the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS); Core Labour Standards; and gender impact analysis. Its Chair, Dr Annette Lawson (ex WNC Commissioner and ex WNC Chair, *who may be in the audience*) attended a UN conference as part of the UK delegation in an advisory capacity. DTI agreed to take over the secretariat in 2006 – an example of successful incorporation of gender into mainstream policymaking, and successful building of the capacity of women's organisations to advise government directly without the need for ongoing facilitation from the WNC.

Iraqi Women's Internship Programme (IWIP)

- The Iraqi Women's Internship Programme, a pioneering model of international capacity-building, began in December 2004 and ended in September 2006. Funded by a grant from the Department for International Development's Civil Society Fund via the British Council, it aimed to build the capacity of Iraqi women's civil society organisations to engage more effectively with Iraq's political agenda and national decision-making. The programme was designed to show how professional bodies uphold standards (for example, the law society) and how the state is held publicly accountable (e.g. through the Metropolitan Police Authority and the Equality Commissions).
- The programme ran twice during this period, each round comprised two phases. In Phase One, a selected group of Iraqi women

underwent a comprehensive programme of capacity-building in the UK (and in 2005, Canada), whilst in Phase Two, they each planned to cascade train a minimum of 25 women from their networks in Iraq. I am delighted to tell you that 628 people have benefited from the cascade training. A monitoring meeting was held at the end of the programme in Jordan, to enable both groups of participants to discuss with the programme co-ordinator their progress and learning.

- The WNC provided briefing for a debate on Iraq in the Lords in February this year for Baroness Royall of Blaisdon. The WNC's internship programme was mentioned and one of the interns was quoted, who said,

“terrorism cannot and will not take away the knowledge and skills we have learned and cascaded through the internship programme; they will outlive the present atrocities”.

- I am also delighted to tell you that the devolved nations played a large part in this programme. Through Ann Hope and Barbara Erin, two former WNC Commissioners, they secured help from many organisations in Northern Ireland, for example, Community Relations Council, the Fall's Women's Centre, the British Council in Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, Ballybeen Women's Centre, Women's Committee, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. There was also a round table discussion with women's voluntary and community groups and they met with women from the political parties. Any of the Iraqi women will tell you just how useful they felt this was and how

many similarities they felt were between the experiences of women in Northern Ireland and women in Iraq.

- In Wales, they met with members of the National assembly for Wales and the WWNC. In Scotland, the Iraqi women met with members of the Scottish Executive, women's organisations like Amina's Network, Glasgow City Council, the Scottish Interfaith Council, Scottish Parliament, Equality officials and MSPs and East Renfrewshire Women Across the World.
- We were also fortunate that we were able to arrange for the women to meet or shadow Equalities Minister, Meg Munn, Health Secretary, Patricia Hewitt, Minister, Harriet Harman, Joan Ruddock MP and Margaret Moran MP. When they were in Canada, the women gave evidence to the Canadian Foreign Affairs Select Committee about the situation in Iraq.
- The programme report, '*A Journey of Discovery*' was recently published and launched on June 6th. It covers the planning, delivery and evaluation of the programme.
- We would like to expand this to include women in Islamic countries worldwide.

Migration and Asylum

- The WNC set up a Migration and Asylum Group in 2005 which brings together academics and service providers in the normal way, as well as representatives from the devolved nations. Many of these groups are typically under-resourced and WNC's aim is to build their capacity to engage with Government and add value to the activities of the sector. The Group have had specific input to the new points-based consultation system, issues around the lack of natal care for women

with no recourse and reactive issues around trafficked women with no recourse, in conjunction with the other WNC Groups to give a unique and comprehensive response to Government.

- More broadly, the group have contributed to wider WNC consultations on trafficking and the Equalities Review which have meant that WNC were able to offer comprehensive and unique responses from a varied and sizeable women's sector. The Group have engaged the Director of Immigration and Nationality Directorate, Lin Homer and after a meeting with her are now engaged in an ongoing dialogue around gender and asylum issues.
- Another function of WNC is to enable all these Groups and partners to engage with the busy equalities agenda, so all the Groups have input their specific issues into the WNC CEDAW Shadow Report, the Equalities and Discrimination Law Review.

Equalities Legislation - Commission for Equalities and Human Rights

- The WNC sits on the Equality and Diversity Forum, the NGO umbrella group for equality organisations across all six equality strands. Its main function is to bring the equality sector together to engage collectively with the new CEHR. The WNC plays an active role, feeding in the results of a number of consultations it has undertaken with women's organisations. Chief among these have been: two open meetings with WNC partners to consult them on the Government's proposals to establish CEHR, coupled with a written consultation exercise, and leading to two reports to government; three formal responses to the Interim Report of the Equalities Review (one submitting evidence, one general, and one produced by the

WNC VAW advisory group) leading to a meeting with the Chair-Designate of the CEHR and an informal commitment to incorporate VAW as a focus for the CEHR's developing work programme. All these consultation reports have been formally submitted to Government.

- The Equalities Act included a clause which set in statute the prioritisation of race and faith in the CEHR's work on promoting good relations. The WNC produced a briefing for parliamentarians setting out the reasons why its partner organisations opposed this. The Equalities Act brought into law the Gender Equality Duty.
- As you may know, the Gender Equality Duty (GED) came into force in April 2007. The GED requires all public authorities in England, Wales and Scotland to demonstrate that they are promoting equality for women and men and how they are eliminating sexual discrimination and harassment. The WNC was invited to join the EOC's Gender Equality Duty Advisory Group, and commented on the EOC's draft guide on the GED. Since then, at the request of the Departments concerned, the WNC has provided advice on developing Gender Equality Schemes to Department of Communities and Local Government, Ministry of Justice, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Home Office.

International Work

Commission on the Status of Women

- Over recent years, WNC attendance at CSW has become a regular responsibility and we play an important role in providing a link between the UK Government delegation and UK NGOs. In doing this, WNC undertake a number of activities to support both parties in preparing for and participating in CSW, including:

- Ensuring NGOs are kept up to date with CSW activities by sending regular email updates.
- Establishing a list of UK NGO representatives going to New York to ensure that NGOs are kept in the loop about CSW activities and so that the Government delegation and FCO at the UK Mission know which NGOs will be in New York.
- Facilitating at least two meetings prior to CSW.
- For those who are attending for the first time to give them general background information on CSW: and
- A meeting between the Government delegation and NGOs to discuss UK priorities for CSW.
- Sending representatives to attend CSW 51 to act as the liaison between the UK Government delegation and NGOs whilst in New York.
- Facilitating NGO briefings each morning and meetings between the Government delegation and NGOs each evening.
- Establishing close working relationships with FCO's UK Mission and DfID to enable close working and co-operation directly with EU negotiators and NGOs.
- Supporting and promoting side events being held during CSW by UK NGOs.

Parallel Side Events

- This year, the WNC, supported by National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO) facilitated a side event entitled: *Developing International Indicators on VAW*. The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Yakin Ertuk and internationally renowned VAW specialist, Professor and WNC Commissioner, Liz Kelly

discussed global indicators on how to measure violence against women. This will enable Governments to be measured on the problems and progress in their countries.

- This was extremely well attended with standing room only. A lively debate followed and women from all over the world discussed the specific proposals and the vital need for agreed indicators. The report on which the side event was based will be submitted by Yakin Ertuk to the Human Rights Committee at the end of 2007.
- WNC have a responsibility to produce the CEDAW shadow report and with the UK going before the CEDAW Committee in 2008, we are in the process of writing the new CEDAW report and the final draft was sent last week.
- The VAW Group are actively contributing to the WNC Shadow Report on CEDAW. They are also contributing to a thematic shadow report on violence against women, drawn up by the End Violence Against Women Campaign.

WNC Women's Human Rights E-network

- The Women's Human Rights E-network (formerly the International Working Group) was established to bring together the views of women from around the UK on international issues, to lobby government on key topics, and to contribute to government policy.
- The e-network is open to WNC partners, and organisations and individuals interested in learning more about women's human rights and gender equality from an international perspective. In a regular email circulation, e-network members receive up-to-date information on gender issues in the international arena, invitations to events and seminars, information on current government and

NGO initiatives, and have opportunities to contribute to consultation exercises.

Work of the Commissioners

- In terms of work other Commissioners have done in the devolved nations: I have led two events per year for Welsh partners and I accompany the WNC Chair, together with a delegation of partners, to meet the Welsh Equalities Minister every year. Former Northern Ireland Commissioners Ann Hope (of the Irish TUC) and Barbara Erwin held open meetings with NI partners and organised a conference in Belfast for the Minister for Europe, Denis MacShane. This conference was one of three commissioned from the WNC by the FCO as part of their dialogue with women on Europe. With Ann Hope's support, the WNC Chair led a delegation in 2006 to meet the SoS for NI, Peter Hain, to address a number of difficult issues during the suspension of the NI Assembly. The WNC was able to play a key role in facilitating this meeting.

Wrap up:

- Since 1999, WNC's partnership base has increased by 900%. The aim has been to increase the partnership base in order to make the WNC as representative as possible. This has been done through multiple strategies of targeting diverse groups under the equality strands, but also increasing regional representation. We have also reached excluded women, who have proved more expensive to reach; women without English as a first language; those who are distrustful of official bodies and only by gaining the trust of the small organisations can those women be accessed;

women in poverty. Uniquely, WNC strives to reach women within the six strands, and ensure wide representation on all its groups.

- In addition to our formally registered partners, we have some 4,500 contacts on our database. This includes women's organisations, human rights organisations, local and central government officials and think tanks.
- Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. I think you will agree, WNC have worked on a variety of issues. All the reports I have mentioned are available to download from the WNC's website, copies can be requested from the WNC, details on 'a voice for women' leaflets. I have some partnership forms if you would like to join us. We would very much welcome you as a Partner.

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