



Older Women's Network (OWN) Ireland Bantracht na Sinsear

SUBMISSION TO GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION ON UN PERIODIC REVIEW OF IRELAND'S HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

5th June 2011

Introduction

The Older Women's Network links older women (55+) and older women's groups together. OWN works to build the capacity of older women to have a voice in the policy and decision making process. It works in partnership with a number of agencies particularly with an anti poverty focus. It provides opportunities for life learning and raises the profile of older women. OWN is a national organization with links at local, national and EU level. It is a member of the National Women's Council of Ireland, The Older and Bolder Alliance, the Senior Citizens Parliament and the AGE Platform.

The Older Women's Network (OWN IRELAND) came into existence in 1995 although informal meetings and get-togethers had been taking place since 1993. In 2000 OWN became part of the National Anti-Poverty Networks Programme and was established as a National independent registered company with charitable status and its own offices and staff.

OWN Aims

- connects older women with each other and promotes friendship
- provides information and advocacy
- promotes life long learning
- Facilitates workshops and seminars to discuss issues relevant to older women
- Helps give older women a voice

In preparing this submission, OWN staff have drawn from research reports compiled by the Older Women's Network and other published research from organisations active in the fields of gender and of ageing. We have also drawn empirical and current data from a consultation meeting with OWN members which took place in May 2011.

Summary

Articles 2 and 3 of the Amsterdam Treaty puts responsibility on member states to promote and ensure gender equality but in Ireland, there has been a deficit in addressing ageing from a gendered perspective.¹ Older women experience ageing differently to men and the discrimination older women experience is often intersectional, their old age compounding other forms of discrimination based on gender, ethnic origin, disability, levels of poverty, marital status or literacy.

Promotion and Protection of the Human Rights of Older Women in Ireland

The Need for Woman-Friendly Pensions

The major pathways into retirement in Ireland are the State Pensions; contributory and non-contributory. 52% of older females are on these programmes and 68% of males, so the share of females in regular receipt of a public pension is 16 percentage points below the male share.² The lower percentage of females receiving a regular public pension is due to the lower labour force participation of women and interrupted work patterns due to care responsibilities, while the marriage bar prevented married women from working in the public service up to the 1970s. This is compounded by the fact that while 40% of males have a second pillar income through occupational pensions, only about 26% of females do so.³ Women are living longer than

¹ Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland (2011) *Focus on Ageing Strategies*. Dublin: CARDI

² Gannon, B & Raab, R. (2009) 'Pensions in Ireland', *Economics of Ageing Bulletin* 1/2009, ICSG

³ Gannon, B & Raab, R. (2009) 'Pensions in Ireland', *Economics of Ageing Bulletin* 1/2009, ICSG

their male counterparts and with less access to public pensions, older females are acknowledged to be at higher risk of poverty than their male counterparts. In developing a National Positive Ageing Strategy, the Irish State has affirmed its commitment to the United Nations Principles. These principles are Independence, Participation, Care, Self-fulfilment and Dignity. In the newly developed National Pensions Framework, the State acknowledges that there are significant issues associated with eligibility for the state pension and that these are 'perceived as being unfair to certain groups of people'⁴. The fact that many women, who have spent the best part of their lives in caring for family members and others, are now ineligible for state support in their own right, is an absolute affront to their human rights and their dignity and it removes from them the right to independence and by implication the ability to participate in many aspects of societal and community life. In its summary to the National Pensions Framework, the state has committed to apply credits rather than disregards to homemakers and backdate these to 1994 for new pensioners.⁵ This raises a number of important issues; where does it leave those older women who are not new pensioners? And also, in the current climate of fiscal tightening, it is difficult to see how the state will follow through with this commitment yet the change is badly needed as the current situation infringes the human rights of many older women while increased costs of utilities such as electricity and heating and planned levies such as those on water usage will hit those on lower incomes proportionately harder than those on higher incomes. Lastly, the mental and emotional strain that is being placed on older lone women because of lack of access to a pension has been verbalised during the consultation process as a feeling of sad hopelessness about a viable future for themselves beyond that of the very immediate present.⁶ This is an unacceptable situation by any human rights standard.

Older Women and Health

⁴ Department of Social and Family Affairs (2010) *National Pensions Framework*. Dublin: Stationery Office

⁵ Department of Social and Family Affairs (2010) *National Pensions Framework*. Dublin: Stationery Office

⁶ Consultation Meeting with OWN Members, 10th May 2011, Dublin

The Irish government has indicated its commitment to gender mainstreaming in health at national level through the publication of the *National Women's Strategy 2007-2016* which supports such a model through its eighth objective: 'To improve the health status of women in Ireland through gender focused policies'⁷. However, little progress to date has taken place in this area. OWN supports the rights of older Irish women to appropriate, timely health care systems: in particular for early diagnosis of breast cancer, cervical cancer screening and musculoskeletal problems. The lack of gender awareness in clinical studies also affects our knowledge of the ageing process and its health related challenges. Women have historically been excluded from clinical trials⁸ and older women have not been an exception. Treatments for women are currently based on a male model, regardless of the fact that women may react differently to treatments than men. Moreover, the results of medical research on men are generalised to women without sufficient evidence of applicability to them.

Other areas of Concern

OWN is concerned about the lack of statistical data, disaggregated by age and sex, regarding abuse, neglect and violence against older women, and also their insecurity in respect of their financial, medical and housing needs, which cumulatively expose them to multiple forms of discrimination.

Gender and age discrimination, accompanied by physical and emotional vulnerability, unsatisfactory arrangements for independent living and insufficient appreciation and estimation as members of their family or community, make the life of an older woman more difficult, as their rights are often violated. Many older women from rural areas and older communities whose transport routes are no longer profitable do not have access to transport.

In Ireland the state of widowhood or being single due to divorce or never having been married profoundly changes older women's status in the society

⁷ DJELR 2007 *National Women's Strategy 2007-2016*. Dublin: Government of Ireland

⁸ Prunty, M. 2008 'Poverty and ageing' in in S. Quin and P. Kennedy (eds.) *Ageing and Social Policy in Ireland*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

and can result in discrimination both in law and in practice, particularly in terms of property and inheritance rights.

Though older women often play a crucial role as a care giver and parent substitute in families affected by divorce, separation or suicide, the economic downturn, or care to elderly relatives or dependent adult children with special needs their contributions are not recognised, poorly remunerated and undervalued.

Poverty is disproportionately common among older women due to unequal access to credit and labour markets, unequal remuneration and unremunerated work at home.

National policies on gender equality and non discrimination rarely include the issues of older women. In Ireland ageism and age discrimination continue to be tolerated and accepted at the individual level, institutional and policy level. However, despite addressing concerns for the situation of older women, their rights are not systematically addressed. In the majority of cases, older women and the discrimination they experience remain invisible.

OWN welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION ON the UN PERIODIC REVIEW OF IRELAND'S HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD and hopes that this will assist in providing a framework and support which will enable older women's rights to be recognised