



Older Women's Network (OWN Ireland)

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Submission to the European Commission On Social Reality

Introduction.

The Older Women's Network (OWN) Ireland is a national organisation which links older women and older women's organisations. One of its main objectives is to encourage, facilitate and resource older women to have a voice on issues of concern and to participate in policy and decision making processes.

Since 2005, when OWN was invited by the European commission office to attend a round-table with Commissioner Margot Wallstrom, the network has participated in several consultative processes. An OWN working group was established in 2006 and this group has been involved in drafting several submissions on European Affairs. A copy of the questionnaire prepared by the Commission office in Dublin was distributed to these women, many of whom attended the seminars and information days organised during 2007

This submission is OWNs response to the call for views on European Social Trends with reference to 'what contributes to well being in today's society?'

A meeting was held on October 22nd 2007 in the EU Offices, Molesworth Street, D2 which was attended by members of the OWN EU working group, to discuss and explore the implications of Irish social trends as to what contributes to well being in today's society. This paper singles out particular issues/topics, not because these issues are exceptional but because OWN members wanted to highlight certain points that they believe are interesting and extremely relevant to their experiences and the knowledge which they bring to this consultation process.

The meeting discussed the following main issues:

Economic opportunity- Well Being
Poverty and Equality
Effect of Multiculturalism and Diversity
New patterns of family life
Barriers to good health and social mobility
Quality of life and challenges of an aging society

Economic opportunity- Well Being

The general consensus was that it was essential to have an adequate income to enjoy a sense of well being and to take advantage of educational, cultural and social opportunities.

With regard to pensions everyone agreed that there should be:

1. An optional age for retirement (for women starting at 60) and that,
2. In future mandatory pension provision should be made by young people starting work

All agreed it was too late for many older women to take advantage in changes relating to access to pensions in today's society, as many women in the past worked extremely hard in the home and although many had small domestic jobs, i.e.: knitting, cleaning etc, there was no way a pension could be derived from this type of work, as money earned was used to supplement the male breadwinners wage.

Poverty and Equality

After some debate it was agreed that a three tier system has evolved in recent times in Ireland. To elaborate further, tier 1 represents the lower socio economic group (for example those without work, on long term social welfare payments). Tier 2 is the middle income group that ranges from being slightly over the threshold to qualify for any benefits which could improve their quality of lives, and then those that are on the upper level of tier 2 who can enjoy a relatively comfortable existence. Tier 3 consists of those with unlimited funds who seem to enjoy a more than comfortable lifestyle.

Many members felt that a greater number of people were borrowing to fund a lifestyle. This point was highlighted further as the general opinion is that there will always be poverty but that a new form of poverty is emerging which is hidden and that the poverty gap has widened, regardless of people being entitled to a reasonable standard of living.

In conclusion members felt that Ireland is still a very unequal place to live, in terms of ageism, status in the community and ethnic race.

Effect of Multiculturalism and Diversity

As this was discussed in a recent submission it was not debated in depth at this time, as there was a very strong opinion expressed regarding the 'luxury in which foreign nationals were living'. Although many welcomed new communities to Ireland they believed that there was too many entering and the Government was making no provision as to how they could be integrated into Irish Society.

The visa processing system was discussed, it was agreed that it was too slow and is inhumane to keep people waiting for 5 years for permission to stay and work, especially as they can contribute to the Irish economy (in particular the health care system) during the application process.

New patterns of family life

There is more opportunity for travel and plenty of activities if you are information savvy, resulting in older people today enjoying freedoms not experienced by their own parents.

Some older women have the option of re-entering the workforce by choice and not out of economic necessity. Coinciding with this, older women remarked on how wonderful it is now that women have a choice in how they live their lives and can work outside the home if they so wish.

However, older people feel recent emerging patterns of family life are having a negative impact upon them as:

- Adult children working longer hours resulting in less time being spent with their own children, as they are institutionalised crèches, moved on from school to college or the burden of care resting with the grandparents.
- Adult children are continuing to live longer with their own parents.
- A breakdown in the traditional family structures resulting in a lack of values and respect.

Barriers to good health and social mobility

- It was agreed that access to information is vital and is key to participation in Irish Society. Information saturation in the various areas of the media can never be reached but issues were raised in relation to contact details and questions that should be asked when contact is made.
- With reference to health and the enjoyment of good health there must be better access to health care services for all, regardless of location or status. This should be facilitated by a more cohesive service provided by the HSE and more public health nurses should be available.
- Maximising information obtained from the Irish census should be utilised in terms of planning and perhaps a new category could encompass 'health of the nation'.
- The areas of aging and disability should be tackled in order to challenge attitudes.
- Social isolation needs to be addressed with reference to older people living alone in Ireland. Suggestions of retirement villages were raised, in turn giving homes to the state.
- Access to adequate transport is an issue as many bus routes are being altered to facilitate new communities and are therefore taking away resources from mature areas where the population is aged.
- Rural communities were also identified for inadequate transport services. One member raised the point that seasonal increases in the population of certain rural areas would be wasteful as the service would not be utilised to maximum capacity at other times of the year.
- All agreed that to be socially mobile, an adequate income is vital.
- Members debated the continuity of health care and service provision, and identified as a priority the Breast Cancer Screening project.

Quality of life and challenges of an aging society

Members felt that adequate income and access to services are vital components in their quality of life, especially with regard to health and transport. It was the consensus that older people now are enjoying a better lifestyle than that of their parents but that there are added stresses upon them in terms of the changing forms of family patterns i.e.: assisting with child rearing and financial support of their adult children.

It was agreed that the burden of care should be upon the state to provide for its aging population, as taxes have been paid throughout their lives for this purpose.

Consensus of members was that more training in the use of IT should be provided and that broadband should be available free of charge. The European Travel card was discussed along with personal security.

The majority of members agreed that their grandchildren will benefit from changes in Irish society, such as education, finance and opportunities but that some core values have diminished/eroded in terms of respect, humanity and caring for others

Conclusion

This submission highlights some of the opinions Irish older women have about what contributes to well being in Ireland in today's society. While many aspects of contemporary life are very satisfactory, others are a cause of concern. It is considered that it is vital that policy makers should be kept aware of the issues and concerns of older people to ensure that they are not marginalised.