



Older Women's Network (OWN) Ireland

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SUBMISSION

TO

The National Economic and Social Forum NESF

On

Care for Older People

January 2005

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Charity No. 14792 Registered No.356577 

The **Older Women's Network** is a membership organisation which links older women and older women's groups in Ireland together. It is an inclusive collective of older women in all their diversity. **OWN's** activities are structured to allow all of its members to participate.

OWN is one of the ten *National Anti-Poverty Networks* funded by the *Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs* and supported by the *Department of Health and Children*.

The Main Aims of OWN Ireland.

- To provide a forum for discussion and action on older women's issues and needs.
- To highlight the inequalities experienced by older women due to their age and gender, while encouraging an awareness of social exclusion.
- To educate the public and policy-makers about the circumstances and interests of older women.
- To influence policy change on the issues of concern.
- To promote the personal development of older women living in Ireland.
- To enhance the education of older women through self-help and social groups.

The main Activities of OWN Ireland

- OWN brings older women together for conferences, seminars, Review days, meetings and other events to enable them to exchange their knowledge, experience and skills. It facilitates members' working groups on issues of concern.
- Through newsletters and events, OWN provides its members with information on policies which affect them. It also provides information on interesting and creative activities which augment the life-long learning of its members.

- OWN provides Irish older women with a unified voice by working in close co-operation with other organisations and statutory bodies.
- OWN highlights the inequalities experienced by older women due to their age and gender, while encouraging an awareness of social inclusion.

The Submission to the NESF on Care for Older People

Members of OWN were invited to a seminar on 2nd December 2004 to discuss the NESF project on care for Older People and present ideas for the submission from OWN. An explanatory sheet was sent to all members of OWN with the invitation to the seminar. (See *Appendix 1*). Views of members who were unable to attend the seminar have also been included in this submission.

Over 80 OWN members from all over the country attended the seminar. Workshops, which were facilitated by OWN members, concentrating on the following topics: (See *Appendix 2*)

- The delivery of services in respect to health and social care
- Age discrimination
- How older women can realise their potential and participate more fully in society
- The positive contribution which older women can make to society.

The delivery of services in respect of health and social care

OWN agrees with research findings which indicate that most older people wish to remain independent in their own home for as long as possible.

To ensure continuing independence older women require;

Good health
Freedom from financial worries
Security
Appropriate home care
Social supports
Recognition of their worth.

While older women can contribute to their own good health by exercising, eating properly and remaining alert, we consider access to medical care is a priority for maintaining good health.

Delivery of health care

All recent government strategies have stated that health care systems should be needs driven and person-centred. Yet many older women are anxious about how they can access appropriate care, particularly in the case of sudden dependency. The current situation in A & E departments throughout the country is a matter of great concern.

OWN supports the development of personal care packages which would help to fast track older women's access to acute services and ensure continuity of care.

OWN proposes that there should be health centres providing a range of care services in every community. These would ensure that older women would receive appropriate supports to maintain independent living.

While acknowledging that the NESF is proposing to leave aside consideration of the role of carers, we would urge that the matter of respite care should be included in its deliberations on service delivery. Many older women have a double role as carers of grandchildren and carers of disabled relatives.

Residential Care

The emphasis on community also applies to residential care. We feel very strongly that older people in residential care will not become totally dependent and socially excluded if they remain within their own community. The on-going problems regarding the funding of nursing home care are of grave concern to us. It is unacceptable that an issue such as this should be so stressful to older people and it is imperative that the current practices and ambiguities are regularised and clarified.

OWN calls for the allocation of funding for the delivery of services from community based care facilities which have already been identified in recent

strategies, and a comprehensive quality system to be established for all health facilities both public and private.

Screening for Reproductive Cancers

OWN members continue to be concerned at the age limit of 65 for breast cancer screening. This policy disregards the “key principle” of equity underlying the 2002 Health Strategy. We recommend that this policy is reviewed as quickly as possible. OWN is also concerned that breast cancer screening is still not available nationwide.

Older Women and Health Professionals

Some of our members have, from time to time, experienced ageist and dismissive attitudes from health care professionals. There is also a sense that their health conditions and treatments are not been adequately explained to them due to assumptions which underrate older peoples’ intellectual ability and health awareness. We recommend that all training of health professionals incorporates age-awareness and that an advocacy service for older people, particularly those in residential care should be established.

Social Services

Many older people could remain independent for longer if a ‘sliding scale’ of need-based services were available. A little help in the house and garden; occasional ‘meals on wheels’; minor house adaptations might be all that is required. Many of these tasks could be undertaken by volunteers. OWN would like to see volunteering encouraged and supported – with proper monitoring and supervision to allay fears of exploitation.

We would like to see a nationwide social service system developed where home help services would be provided in response to regular needs assessments. We also recommend that sufficient funding is provided to train and pay social staff and that the value of their work is recognised.

Rural Transport :

Rural public transport continues to be an issue of major concern to older women. Lack of transport, isolation and lack of mobility are a primary cause of social exclusion. We urge that the work of such organisations as Irish Rural Link be implemented throughout the country.

Urban Transport: Many older people living in older housing estates are affected by curtailment in public bus services. Services are increasingly directed at newer housing estates which militates against customers with free travel passes. We suggest that there is a need for a well-integrated public transport system with frequent stops in areas with a high proportion of older people linked to developing services in newer districts. We also suggest that the Department of Social and Family Affairs should be kept aware of changes to services affecting older people.

Security

The threat of violence against older people on the streets and in their homes has a detrimental effect on the quality of life of older women. Fear to venture out during the hours of darkness limits their participation in society. OWN members consider that the security issue could be improved by the development of inter-generational community support and increased presence of gardai on the streets.

The issue of elder abuse is of great concern to OWN. We have qualitative evidence that an unacceptable number of older women are being subjected to emotional or psychological abuse from family members, with little or no redress. We strongly urge the implementation of the recommendations of the Report on Elder Abuse (2003)

Pensions

Adequate pensions in their own rights are essential for the health and well-being of older women. OWN continues to work with other organisations such as the National Women's Council of Ireland and the Irish Senior Citizen's Parliament for equality in pensions for older women. Although some

progress has been made regarding homemakers, it is imperative that women are paid pensions directly and that their years as homemakers are fully recognised.

Participation

“Genuine participation in society ... economically, socially, culturally ... is close to impossible without an adequate level of literacy”, Equality Authority Report, (2002)

We would add that information and education are also essential for participation.

Many of OWN's members complain that it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to access relevant information especially if they are not computer literate. Even popular radio shows now refer their listeners to web sites. However, older women's low formal level of education can be a deterrent to their participation in new educational opportunities especially in IT training. While we commend the tailor-made IT courses that are now available, only a small of older people can access them.

We would like to see a dedicated nationwide IT training programme delivered at times and locations suitable for older people.

As a national network, OWN can help to disseminate relevant information to older women throughout the country through its newsletters and information sheets. It is interesting to note that receipt of such mail can make vulnerable, dependent – even bed-bound older women - feel socially included.

We welcome the use of consultative processes in the policy making process. We feel that participation by older women in this process is crucial. It acknowledges the worth of their experiences and values their contribution. However, information is essential to enable all types of older women to have a meaningful input. We strongly support the continuation of consultative processes especially regarding the delivery of services.

Contribution to Society

Many of OWN's members make an obvious contribution to society as carers of their grandchildren and carers of disabled relatives. These roles need to be recognised and supported.

One of the greatest contributions older women make is in providing the cement for inter-generational solidarity within their families and frequently within their communities. We feel that intergenerational solidarity is of vital importance in our ageing society and that the skills and experiences of older women are being under utilised in this and other areas.

One of the biggest impediments to older women fulfilling their potential, participating in policy-making processes and contributing to society, is social isolation. Many older women are lonely and need to combat low self-esteem. Sociability provides opportunities and solidarity leads to a confident voice on issues. OWN continues to work to combat social exclusion. Every support should be given to OWN and to all other organisations working to this end.

General Summary

In this submission we have highlighted the importance of developing the potential of older women and supporting the participation of older women in society in general and in policy making in particular. The contribution which older women can make is of benefit to society as a whole.

To enable older women to live independently within their own communities for as long as possible, we have suggested some factors and emphasised the need for community based services.

As one of the most socially excluded groups in the country, it is essential that there is a growing awareness of the unacceptable inequalities older women face on the grounds of age and gender. With the increasing diversity in Irish society, older women may suffer discrimination on other grounds as well.

Financial dependence, lack of formal education and stereotyping continue to contribute to the inequalities suffered by older women.

We would strongly urge the NESF's Project team to be conscious at all times of the special needs and circumstances of older women.

Appendix 1
Theme for Discussion Groups on 2nd December 2004

The National Economic and Social Forum recently established a Project Team on care for Older People and has invited relevant organisations to make submissions by 21st January, 2004

The Team will :

- examine the choices available to older people in respect of health and social care services
- identify any gaps in supporting the wishes of the majority of older people to live at home.

Government policy in recent years has acknowledged the research findings that most older people want to remain in their own home for as long as possible.

- Since 1997, €270 million additional funding has been provided for services for older people.
- An inter-departmental group has been established to ensure services for older people are delivered in an integrated and co-ordinated manner.
- The current social partnership agreement, *Sustaining Progress*, includes Care of Older People as part of one of the ten Special Initiatives.

The NESF project has been established to identify the steps necessary to ensure that anyone who wants to stay in a community setting in old age is able to do so.

*(The project will **not** be considering the role of carers and the funding of long-term care since these issues are being dealt with currently by the Dept of Social and Family Affairs.)*

The Older Women's Network intends to make a submission to the NESF on the above topics so that the voice of older women can be heard.

The submission will be based on the views of OWN's members expressed at the discussion groups today.

APPENDIX 2
Guidelines for discussion groups on 2 December 2004
for submission to NESF

1. What do you think is required to enable older women to remain independent for as long as possible?

2. Do you think there is sufficient solidarity between families, neighbours, communities, volunteers and statutory workers?

If not, how do you think this might be encouraged, to benefit older people?

3. If at any stage, you become dependent, what health and social services would you like to see in place, to ensure your quality of life?

4. What is the positive contribution older women can make
 - a) in the family?
 - b) in the community?
 - c) to Irish society in general?
 - d)

5. OWN facilitates Older Women to meet together to discuss issues; it provides information to its members through newsletters and meetings; it offers its members training; it encourages its members to participate creatively and it provides ways to make its members views known to policy makers.

Do you feel that being a member of OWN has helped you to participate more fully in society?

In what ways do you think older women can participate more fully in defining policy?

6. Do you think that the full potential of older women is being realised?

If not, how do you suggest this could be done?

7. What do you think is the impact of age discrimination?

8. How do you think age discrimination should be tackled?