



Older Women's Network (OWN) Ireland
Senior House,
All Hallows College,
Grace Park Road, Dublin 9.

Tel: 01-8844536/537/538 Fax: 01-8844534

Email: ownireland@eircom.net

SUBMISSION

TO

The National Forum on Europe

On

**The 50th Anniversary of the Treaty of Rome – OWN's
vision for the future European Union**

December 2006

Directors: Ina Broughall (chairperson) Anne Gallagher, Kitty Harlin, Gemma McCabe, Mamo McDonald, Pat O'Flynn, Catherine Rose.
Chief Executive: Louise Richardson

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. OWN works for the social inclusion of all older women in Ireland. **OWN's** activities are structured to allow all of its members to participate.

OWN is part of the *National Anti-Poverty Networks* programme funded by the *Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs*

The Main Aims of OWN Ireland.

- To provide a forum for discussion and action on older women's issues and needs.
- To educate the public and policy-makers about the circumstances and interests of older women.
- To facilitate older women to influence policy change on the issues of concern.
- To give older women a voice

OWN Ireland is a member of AGE Platform in Brussels and is currently Ireland's representative on the Council of AGE and formerly a member of the Age Discrimination Working Group.

OWN is a member of EAPN Ireland (The European Anti-Poverty Network) and serves on its Board of Directors.

In 2005, OWN was invited by the European Commission Representation in Dublin to take part in a round-table with Commission Margot Wallstrom. In November 2006 OWN was invited to attend the European Civil Society Forum in Bergamo.

In July 2006 OWN submitted a Submission to the European Commission in response to the call for comments on the White Paper on a European Communication Policy.

OWN was subsequently invited to make a presentation 'Empowering Citizens - view of the Older Women's Network' at the Seminar on the White Paper organised by the Irish Representation of the European Commission on 23 November 2006.

OWN working group on European Issues.

In response to requests by OWN members for more information on the European Union, informal workshops were organised at several local venues in the spring of 2006, with speakers from the Commission's office in Dublin.

A national seminar was organised for 14th June, 2006 in Dublin, at which Niamh Carmody from the Commission office spoke about the EU structures and the White Paper. This seminar was attended by over 100 members of OWN from all geographical locations who received information booklets and leaflets. Those who indicated their interest in helping to draft OWN's submission were invited to attend a meeting on 11th July – and the OWN Working Group on European Issues was established.

50th Anniversary of the Treaty of Rome.

When the National Forum on Europe published a call for submissions on 'Your vision for the Future European Union', a circular was sent from the OWN office to members who had expressed interest in European issues, asking for their vision for the future of the European Union and also for their views on their future as Europeans.

A meeting of the Working Group was held on 11th December.

The women discussed:

- **What significance, if any, the Treaty of Rome had had for them?**
- **What they felt when Ireland joined the EEC.**
- **What the benefits/disadvantages were for them of Ireland being a member of the European Union**
- **How they felt about future expansion of the European Union**
- **If they had the power, what would they change about the European Union**

And finally,

- **What was their vision for the European Union of the future**

The Treaty of Rome

The Treaty of Rome had not impacted on most members in 1957. The economic implications were not perceived by them as affecting Ireland at the time. However, everyone agreed that they saw the Treaty as a great incentive for preventing war in Europe.

Ireland becoming a member of the EEC

No one felt European at the time Ireland joined the EEC. Indeed there was apprehension about the effect this would have on Ireland's independence and national identity. However, it was generally considered that the farmers would benefit. More interestingly, everyone felt that being a member of the EEC raised Ireland's status and gave the country more credibility by taking Ireland out of the shadow of England, giving Ireland equal status in Europe.

The benefits/disadvantages of being a member of the European Union

OWN considers that:

European monies have helped to modernise Ireland with improvement to the infrastructure, especially roads.

Europe has had a positive effect on gender equality providing greater opportunities for women, although this equality has brought its own pressures especially on mothers not working outside the home.

Travel has become easier and the introduction of the Euro has increased mobility even further.

Ireland's horizons have been broadened, having previously been limited to England and the United States.

Improvements in social welfare, education and health services have all been influenced by Europe.

However, many of us are concerned that being part of Europe (and Ireland's recent prosperity) has caused a loss of Irish identity.

Future expansion of Europe

This issue provoked lively discussion with no consensus.

A majority expressed serious concerns about the expansion of Europe beginning with the two states acceding in 2007. They felt that restrictions on free movement of people from the accession states would have to be imposed. A minority strongly disagreed.

The majority was emphatically against Turkey joining the Union on various grounds - religious; that most of Turkey was not in Europe; because of Turkey's bad human rights record.

A minority was in strong disagreement that religion should be used as a criteria.

This discussion also touched on whether 'God' should be mentioned or not in the Constitutional Treaty.

How different ethnic groups and immigrants were absorbed into the United States of America and conformed to 'American culture' was discussed. There was a general agreement that we should not become European in an 'United States of Europe' sense and many considered that immigrants into Ireland should conform to Irish culture.

There was concern about the Balkan states being accepted because of the recent conflicts in the region which could cause problems to a peaceful Europe.

A case was made for the western independent republics of the former USSR to join on humanitarian grounds, which received minority support.

Interestingly, no one present would have any problems if Iceland, Norway or Switzerland joined as full members.

The main concern voiced by everyone present was that a greatly enlarged Europe could become unmanageable, would have serious financial implications for the current members, would decrease Irish representation (e.g. Ireland might not have a Commissioner) and could dilute our national culture.

OWN's vision for the European Union of the future

Older Women would like to be more involved in Europe especially at a social and cultural level.

We would like to have more knowledge of how social, education and health services are run in other parts of Europe.

We would like to have a better cultural understanding of people living in other European countries.

We would like to maintain our own national identity while being part of Europe.

While recognising that English is one of the commonest languages used in Europe, we would like to overcome some of our language deficiencies.

We would like to see Ireland's free travel for older people extended throughout Europe.

Conclusion

In this submission we highlight some of the opinions older women in Ireland have about the European Union of the future.

In an informal survey (show of hands) at a recent general meeting, everyone present considered themselves European, as well as Irish, in contrast to when Ireland joined the EEC.

While older women have concerns about the continued expansion of Europe in the future, we see the future of Europe as a time of greater opportunities for older people. As one member of the Working Group said, 'Much as we might criticise the EU – remember what we were like before'.

The OWN working group on European issues is holding its next meeting in February (in the Commission Offices at the invitation of the Head of Representation) to discuss a programme to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Treaty of Rome.

As part of this programme, OWN plans to encourage older women to learn a European language and hopes to organise a series of meetings and exchanges with older women from other European countries.