

**41st CEDAW Session, June-July 2008
Great Britain and Northern Ireland**

Oral Statement for the CEDAW Committee

**Presentation by Northern Ireland Women's European Platform Board Member,
Ann Marie Gray**

Thank you Madam Chair,

I am speaking on behalf of the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, an organisation with over 60 member organisations and The UK Joint Committee on women

In relation to Northern Ireland there are four specific issues which we wish to highlight to the Committee:

- The impact of devolution in terms of the unequal application of the CEDAW Convention across the distinct jurisdictions of the UK
- Critical Issues relating to ethnic minority and traveller women in Northern Ireland
- Women's public and political participation – including the application of UN Resolution 1325
- Women's right to reproductive health care

[The impact of devolution in terms of the unequal application of the CEDAW Convention across the distinct jurisdictions with specific reference to Northern Ireland]

A problem in the UK Government submission is that there is no pattern of reporting across the distinct jurisdictions. It is not clear from the report the extent to which measures do or not apply to all or only some parts of the UK. This is evident in relation to substantive areas of social policy – including anti-poverty measures, measures to address inequality in relation to women and work and childcare policy.

[For example, the government refers to a Ten Year Childcare Strategy, a policy which it views as central to addressing lone parent poverty [para 24 and 25 in UK report] but this has not been implemented in Northern Ireland. Although this and other anti-poverty measures have not been applied, from this year lone parents in Northern Ireland will be subject to the more stringent conditionality attached to claiming Social Security benefit which is being applied in Britain, thereby increasing their vulnerability to poverty.]

The Committee may want to ask the government about how it will ensure the application of CEDAW across all UK jurisdictions and what measures will be taken

to effectively address the high levels of female poverty and disadvantage in Northern Ireland.

[Issues of critical importance to Ethnic Minority Women in Northern Ireland]

We would like to take this opportunity to highlight the multiple nature of discrimination faced by the growing population of ethnic minority women in Northern Ireland. Legislative protection against racial discrimination which has been in place in Britain since 1965 was not introduced in Northern Ireland until 1997. Despite the fact that legislation is now in place it is not used effectively or implemented properly by the relevant authorities resulting in discrimination against ethnic minority women. The Racial Equality Strategy introduced in 2005 has not been implemented by the Northern Ireland Assembly. The CEDAW Committee, in its Concluding Observations in 1999, made reference to its concerns regarding the disadvantages faced by minority ethnic women.

Within Northern Irish society the highest levels of poverty, discrimination and marginalisation are faced by the traveller community. Traveller women experience high levels of violence-domestic violence, violence from the settled population and violence from the state (in the form of eviction). The government's own institutionalised racism has compounded these problems by introducing the Unauthorised Encampments Order 2005, which effectively criminalises travellers for their nomadic lifestyle.

The UK should be asked what legislation/policy has been introduced to address the disadvantages faced by minority ethnic and traveller women living in Northern Ireland, (*in relation to violence, employment, education, housing, wages and access to benefits*) and to provide evidence on the impact on such policies.

[Women's public and political participation – including the application of UN Resolution 1325]

The 6th Periodic report of the UK deals with UN Resolution 1325 under Article 3 BUT it makes no reference to Northern Ireland. This is surprising as a central focus of the resolution is to increase the participation of women in conflict resolution and post conflict societies. Women in N.I have been significantly affected by conflict and have been instrumental in helping move from decades of conflict to a prospect of peace . But post-conflict society should enshrine not just a cessation of violence, but a principle of equality on every dimension – not just in relation to Catholic/ Protestant but to women and men. Yet, women continue to be significantly under-represented in key institutions, including many of those directly set up as a result of the peace negotiations. (*Institutions where women are under-represented include the Northern Ireland Assembly, Local Government, appointments to public bodies and the judiciary and police services.*) This is despite the fact that women's NGOs have campaigned on this issue.

[We are aware that UNSCR 1325 was not agreed until 2000, but as it took some time for the UK government to negotiate and establish the new post-conflict structures implementation in some areas could have been achieved. Secondly with the collapse of the government in 2001 and subsequent renegotiation of a second agreement [the St. Andrew's Agreement] this would have been the critical time to include commitment to implementing UNSCR 1325 - which the government failed to do. In the 1970s Northern Ireland experienced a historical removal of powers from local government. This is now being reformed now being reformed through a Review of Public Administration and the inclusion of 1325 principles in this is fundamental.]

The effective implementation of UN Resolution 1325 would do much to enhance women's political and public representation and we would welcome the committee asking government if and how it will commit to this action.

[Women's right to reproductive health care]

The government continues to discriminate against women in Northern Ireland by failing to provide access to abortion services. This is despite the recommendation of the CEDAW Committee in 1999 that the government should initiate a process of reform – including public consultation. Women therefore continue to be denied access to provision which is available under the state National Health Service elsewhere in the UK. Marie Stopes International estimates that approx 1,500 women travel each year from N.I to have abortions in Britain. Because of the financial and logistical difficulties involved in making this journey women have abortions later in pregnancy and have restricted access to aftercare. *[This is because many women feel unable to reveal to doctors and health authorities that they have had abortions. The existing legal position in Northern Ireland carries with it the social demand that women should keep the fact that they had an abortion a secret, or at the very least, that they should be extremely cautious about whom they tell. Women should be able to talk more openly about abortion in Northern Ireland, without such a social stigma attached. Changing the legal position on abortion would enable women to do this.]*

We would ask that the Committee recommends the government respond by ensuring that the legal regulation of abortion in Northern Ireland acknowledges and is compliant with the state's international human rights obligations under CEDAW. Women in Northern Ireland should have the same access to reproductive health services and rights as are available elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Consultation on this issue should be widespread and not confined to narrow interest groups.

The Committee may have noted that in its response to the pre-session questions the government failed to provide information on most of the issues relating to Northern Ireland. We have information on these matters which we can circulate to you.