

41st CEDAW Session, June-July 2008

Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Oral Statement for the CEDAW Committee

Presented by Liz Kelly, Women's National Commission

Thank you Madame Chair for giving me, Commissioner at the Women's National Commission, the opportunity to address the Committee.

On behalf of UK NGOs, I will outline the critical issues highlighted in the UK shadow report which represent the views and experiences of over 500 women's NGO's. While we welcome some commitment of the UK Government to address women's concerns their approach has been piecemeal.

1. The first critical issue is the need to establish a UK-wide, overarching strategy on gender equality. Presently, there is no 'joined up' coherent thinking or implementation within and between Government departments and all other relevant bodies.

We ask the Committee recommends Government implement a UK wide gender equality strategy, which would enable the implementation of CEDAW, and co-ordinate and inform gender equality work. This should be holistic with robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

[By using Beijing's twelve critical areas as the framework, the UK Government could achieve the objectives it signed up to in 1995.]

2. Our second critical issue is the application of the Gender Equality Duty, [i.e. the government's policy on gender equality for public bodies].

Women's NGOs are concerned about the understanding, implementation and interpretation of the Gender Equality Duty [and related legislation and policy in Northern Ireland]. Despite the Duty being based on women's historic inequality, it is being interpreted in a gender neutral way by national and local government, which discriminates against and marginalises women and women's NGOs by failing to address women's specific human rights.

[The State is failing to implement articles in the Convention that provide special and corrective measures to address inequality and discrimination.]

We ask the Committee to recommend Government meets CEDAW obligations rather than working to the current inappropriate formal

model of equality which would include robust gender impact assessments and gender budgeting.

3. We are also seriously concerned about ongoing critical problems with regard to the under-funding of women's NGOs. Government must ensure that women's NGOs are retained and adequately sustained. For example, sexual violence women's groups and domestic violence minority women's groups are currently imperilled due to lack of funding. Only 1.2% of government funding in England is allocated to women's NGO's yet the women's sector comprises 7% of charities. The entire women's sector is increasingly fragile.

We ask the Committee to require the UK government to urgently provide full sustainable funding to women's NGO's working towards women's equality, particularly the violence against women sector. Guidance also needs to be issued on the interpretation of the Gender Equality Duty and the Social Cohesion policy to affirm the importance of women and minority women NGO's.

[Community/social cohesion policies have been recently introduced by the UK Government to improve integration within and between communities primarily to fight the war on terror and Muslim extremism. This has produced an unintended consequence where local government and service commissioning bodies are interpreting this policy as 'one size fits all', and denying single group funding to organisations which target the needs of specific ethnic or gender groups. Funding is going to generic organisations and sidelining women-only and minority women only services.]

4. Despite the CEDAW recommendation in 1999, there is still no national violence against women strategy. Current Government policies are fractured and lack any agreed definition. There is an over-emphasis on reported crime thereby ignoring the greater number of women who do not report, this also ignores holistic NGO practice. Furthermore, policies on sexual and domestic violence are inadequate because they are not effectively resourced, monitored or implemented. This is illustrated in the appalling low rape conviction rate of 5.3%.

We ask the Committee to recommend the need for an overarching violence against women strategy for the UK that is rooted in understanding violence against women as a cause and consequence of gender inequality. It must include the involvement of women's NGO's in the decision making process, time lines, a dedicated budget and effective monitoring and accountability systems.

5. Women with unsettled immigration status are negatively affected by immigration/asylum laws, for example women seeking asylum are routinely denied refugee status on the grounds of gender related persecution. Women with insecure status are not allowed access to aspects of healthcare, public housing and social security benefits. In particular, we have concern about no recourse to public funds which entrap women in violent relationships. Recent

Government announcements for victims of domestic violence are welcome but inadequate as they only provide limited retrospective payments.

The Committee should recommend that the Government abolish the no recourse requirement for women to enable them to escape violence, and integrate the gender guidelines in the asylum determination process.

6. The education curriculum does not incorporate gender equality in any substantive way to address discriminatory stereotypes.

The Committee should recommend compulsory education on gender equality which should be reflected in all areas of the curriculum including sexual ethics, sex education and respectful relationships.

7. The UK's gender pay gap is one of the highest in Europe. This is a major contributor to the persistence of female poverty, particularly given the Government's focus on work as a poverty reduction measure. The National Childcare Strategy which has been implemented in Britain is welcome but there are too few places, at too high a cost.

The Committee should recommend that the Government impose mandatory pay audits for all organisations to reduce the gender pay gap and take effective measures to address occupational segregation. The supply of good quality, affordable childcare should also be extended.

Finally, UK NGOs were disappointed the UK did not nominate an expert to the CEDAW Committee. The UK has never nominated anyone since its inception in 1979. We see this as a lack of commitment to CEDAW.

Women's NGOs were also disappointed that the fifth and sixth State Reports were not presented to parliament.