

**Submission to the Draft National Plan
for Women (2001-2005)**

AkiDWA
and
The Catherine McCauley Centre

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Introduction

The Beijing Platform for Action *‘respects and values the full diversity of women’s situations and conditions and recognises that some women face particular barriers to their empowerment’.*

Akwida and the Catherine McCauley Centre welcomes the publication of the Draft National Plan for Women and it welcomes the opportunity to make some very important recommendations to this plan.

The Fourth World Conference on Women set out The Beijing Platform for Action (PfA) for the advancement of women in 12 critical areas of concern. Since this conference was held in 1995 Ireland’s population has diversified with the immigration of women from many different ethnic backgrounds. The National Plan for Women needs to reflect this diversity and address the issues, areas of concern and areas of positive contribution we women can bring.

Whilst we welcome the associated consultation process we note that the Government has already set out its policies and decisions in relation to each of the twelve areas and is not inviting consultation on any of these areas. Yet there are many deficiencies and omissions in this section and we believe some of our recommendations reflect this.

Whilst the Government wishes to limit consultation inputs to indicators, and visions and aspirations, we feel aspirations and visions are meaningless if not accompanied by the appropriate policies, strategies, programmes, or measures to fulfil them. Our contribution is framed in this spirit.

Akina Dada wa Afrida (AkiDWA) is a voluntary organisation aiming at providing a culturally appropriate service to African women living in Ireland. AkiDWA’s Board objective is to establish a centre where services will be provided.

The Catherine McCauley Centre is dedicated to the development, education and well being of women.

The Consultation Process

The Draft National Plan was launched on October 16th, 2001 and women’s groups were given one month to apply for funding. The closing day for receipt of submissions was set at January 25th 2002, later changed to February 15th. Given that notification of grant approval was not given until early December this left groups a little over two months - including the Christmas period - to engage in consultation among their constituencies and

collate findings into a submission. This highly restrictive time-scale makes no allowance for the participatory processes through which women's groups and networks operate. This is a particularly crucial consideration for women in Ireland who come from ethnic minorities. Not all of us are fully organised and many are isolated from the mainstream of society due to cultural and language barriers. The Beijing Platform for Action is very clear on the importance of participation. The right to participate is the cornerstone of effective policymaking, both in Ireland and in other countries.

If the Government is serious about honouring its commitments to engaging in genuine consultation with public groups the timeframe for the consultation should have been revisited and extended to a realistic limit. Notification should have been advertised and promoted amongst women from ethnic minorities living in Ireland.

In response to the consultation process AkiDWA and the Catherine McCauley Centre held a facilitated workshop on the 9th February. Women representing a diverse number of ethnic minorities in Ireland together with Irish women attended the very lively and informative day. Due to the inadequate time-scale mentioned above it is a pity that we did not have a longer time to go through each of the 12 critical areas as they relate to the National Plan, however, we have outlined some of the core issues which emerged at the workshop together with recommendations for inclusion in the final National Plan for Women.

The Draft Plan is based on consultation with government departments only. The findings, including seventy-five recommendations of an earlier consultation process, (May 2000), facilitated by the Government¹, have been ignored. We recommend that the Government re-examine these recommendations incorporating them into the National Plan.

Beijing Platform for Action - Linking the Local and the Global

The PfA is a global document setting out an action plan in an international context. Thus, while primary responsibility for implementing the PfA rests with national Governments, in the spirit of solidarity and co-operation in which they signed up to the agreement, national Government's commitments extend beyond national boundaries to the international sphere. This is particularly relevant in Ireland today where increasing numbers of women from developing countries are contributing to our economy and society.

We have noted with some concern that this international dimension is very poorly represented in the current Draft of the National Plan. In a global context, the Draft Plan appears to accept the current inequalities between the North and South. In Part 1, of the 173 commitments cited across the 12 'Critical Areas', just 18 (10%) relate to the international context.

¹ 'Promises Made Promises Broken, Beijing + 5 – Alternative Report for Ireland', co-produced with the National Women's Council of Ireland, Women's Aid, Amnesty International, Aontas/WENDI, National Youth Council of Ireland, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Women's Education, Research and Resource Centre; and supported by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform

There are 49 commitments cited under 'Critical Area F - Women and the Economy' however, not one of these refers to our overseas engagements. Nor is there any explicit reference to overseas engagements in Critical Areas G – 'Power and Decision Making', or H – 'Institutional Mechanisms'. The only reference anywhere in the document to trade policy is a fleeting reference to plans to ratify the Cotonou partnership agreement (1.23, pg. 11).

Part III of the National Plan for Women is entitled "A vision of the Aspirations of Women in Relation to the 12 Critical Areas of Concern in the BpfA". We are very unsure as to what this part of the report actually means. We and our sisters in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and other parts of the world assumed that the time for aspiration is over and the time for Action has come. The four UN Conferences held over the past two and half decades debated the issues of concern for women time and time again. The Irish government is now called on to implement strategies and make good on its human rights commitments to women. In Beijing the Government signed up to a Platform for Action. The word "Action" does not appear in the title of the Government's Draft Plan. We would recommend that Part III be eliminated from the draft National Plan for Women and that the plan itself be renamed the "National Action Plan for Women".

General Recommendations

Women from minority ethnic groups living in Ireland have one major problem when trying to go about their daily lives. This is the on-going misunderstandings which they experience on a day to day basis. Their abiding concern is the lack of trained and understanding Service Providers. Their main recommendation to the Government on the National Plan is to provide adequate resources to train all service providers be they in the health service, the social welfare offices, the post offices, the Gadai or others on intercultural understanding.

It is a well acknowledged and researched fact that when people arrive in a different country to their own their inability to predict behaviour patterns can cause stress often referred to as "culture shock". This can lead to frustration, alienation, depression and trauma. Service providers in Ireland need to be aware of this natural occurrence and make allowances. One woman at the workshop cited the degree of confusion experienced time and time again by herself when no-one in officialdom seems to know or recognise the "green book" issued to her by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

Women from ethnic minorities feel very excluded when going about their daily business in Ireland. They have no sense of belonging as they never meet with or see any other women who have black or brown faces. One woman explained how she waited for the bus to come which had the black driver in order to feel some sense of belonging. There was a call to the Government to put measures in place that would integrate us in a meaningful way into Irish Society. Many of us are well qualified, intelligent and

articulate women and would have much to contribute to Irish society if only we were given the chance.

We have made many recommendations under the various critical areas outlined in the PfA and in the draft National Plan for Women. The follow recommendations are general in nature.

- We would like a delegation from AkiDWA and the Catherine McCauley Centre to meet with the minister in order to articulate this submission
- Establish a forum or a department to oversee the safe/secure/integration of ethnic minorities into Ireland
- Establish a forum or a department to oversee all legislation from an ethnic minority perspective
- Provide cultural education programmes on the Irish way of Life for all immigrants from ethnic minorities
- Employ extra support staff, preferably from ethnic minorities, from entry points and at all service providers e.g. Social Welfare offices, Heath Centres, Immigration, Banks
- Provide human telephonists to answer to all government departments who are trained in interculturalism
- Each Government department employ a number of women from ethnic minorities
- Support existing groups such as AkiWDA

Women and Poverty & The Economy

Today over 1 billion people live in extreme poverty; the overwhelming majority of them are women. UN research indicates that women account for 70% of the world's work, however they receive only one tenth of the world's income and own one percent of the world's property. In this light the PfA strategic objectives calls on government to "review, adopt and maintain policies, strategies and measures that address the needs and efforts of women in poverty".

Women from minority ethnic groups in Ireland face a range of economic barriers on a day to day basis. In this regard we would recommend the following:

- The voice of women from ethnic minorities be represented at all stages of the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness.
- The Government is committed to furthering the implementation of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy and "*one of the key principles underlying the Strategy was the reduction of inequalities and, particularly, addressing the gender dimensions of poverty*". Include women from ethnic minorities especially those who are single heads of households.

- An ethnic minority women's group should be recognised as social partners in all negotiations with regard to PPF and the review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS)
- Review current social welfare policies in light of the impact they currently have on women from ethnic minorities
- Review regulations in relation to the opening of bank accounts
- Review regulations in relation to acquiring loans from financial institutions as a failure to do this will result in women being drawn into the net of illegal money lenders
- Provide support for women from ethnic minorities to develop new businesses
- Remove all barriers that currently exist which stop ethnic minority women from actively participating in the economy of the country such as : allowing asylum seekers to ascertain work while waiting for review of their application
- Provide adequate funding to support the development of existing groups representing women from ethnic minority groups.
- Research the current state of poverty as it pertains to women from ethnic minorities in Ireland.

Education and Training of Women

Many women from ethnic minorities experience a huge amount of frustration in Ireland as their educational standards are not recognised or valued. Women who have attained a high standard of primary and secondary education and who possess certificates, diplomas and degrees in various fields are often times treated with suspicion and scepticism by officialdom as if their qualifications count for little or nothing at all. This can lead to loss of confidence and further isolation. The group would strongly recommend the following:

- An equivalence body be established in the Department of Education which could advise all those employing or admitting women from ethnic minorities to jobs or colleges. This body would be able to ascertain the Irish educational equivalent of any qualification obtained outside the Irish Republic.
- If an equivalent qualification is recognised, this body should issue an Irish equivalent qualification certificate.
- Many women from ethnic minorities have had to flee their country and often they have no certificates to prove their qualification. In this instance we would recommend that an assessment examination be given to allow the opportunity to prove the qualification
- We also recommend that mature students from ethnic minorities be able to access all FAS and VEC courses including language and certificate courses and that adequate resources be provided for them (see 2.8 & 2.9 of the draft National Plan)
- The educational concerns of women from ethnic minorities should be included in the White Paper on Adult Education
- Ethnic minority women should be represented on the new National Qualifications Authority and a flexible system of accreditation and progression routes must be developed.

Women and Health

Due to our position in society today women are the main carers of children, the sick and old people. Because of this role we have cause to meet more people in the health services. We have, on the whole, found this to be a traumatic and terrifying experience. This is mainly due to lack of understanding and covert racism. We would recommend the following:

- Intercultural and anti-racist education for all health service providers in Ireland
- Information and training for all health service providers on topical medicine, diseases and all skin types e.g. plastic surgery provision for African women
- The use of women translators or mediators (preferably women from ethnic minorities) when necessary
- Patience, understanding and care by service providers to be foundation stone of the health service
- Automatic asylum in Ireland to be given to women fleeing from persecution, rape, forced marriage, and aids related rape (e.g. young girls being raped in some African countries by men who think they will be cured of aids if they rape a virgin)
- Free post-traumatic counselling to all ethnic minority women who need it especially in relation to those women mention in above point
- Ban any form of female genital mutilation in Ireland
- Accept Rape as a form of war
- Give training to Health staff in their explanation of medical cards to women from ethnic minorities
- Build confidence and trust for women to access services e.g. Rape Crisis counselling and Women's Aid
- Women from ethnic minorities in Ireland to be appointed to the Women's Health Council.

Violence against Women & Women and Armed Conflict

Women from minority ethnic groups experience a range of different forms of violence from state or institutional violence to male domestic violence. Many arrive in this country without having any redress to appropriate services in their country. We recommend the following:

- The development of a national strategy designed, implemented and monitored with women from minority ethnic groups
- NGO's addressing violence against women must be funded to provide culturally appropriate information to women from ethnic minorities. This might mean women from ethnic minorities be employed by the main NGOs
- Women from ethnic minorities to be adequately represented on the Task Force on Violence against Women
- Representation of women from minority ethnic groups on regional planning committees on violence against women.

- A recognition of the experiences of women from minority ethnic groups in relation to state violence and violence experienced in armed conflict.
- Interviewers and interpreters which interview female applicants to the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner be from a variety of ethnic origins.
- Employ women from ethnic minorities in the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner

Power and Decision-Making & Institutional Mechanism for the Advancement of Women

In 1995 the Irish Government made the following promise to “ensure women’s equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making”. Women from minority ethnic groups now form part of the population of Ireland and therefore need to be included in any mechanisms for achieving power.

We recommend the following:

- Devise and introduce a national strategy for increasing the number of women from ethnic minorities in decision making. This must include: on-going training; resources information and monitoring mechanisms, and support for political parties to review electoral processes in order to ensure gender balance in nomination of candidates across all parties.
- Recognise the diversity of women’s situations by ensuring the participation of women from different social groupings at all levels of decision-making.
- A commitment to building the human rights and equality infrastructure in Ireland
- Meeting the responsibility to ensure a high level of awareness and commitment to anti-racism and anti-sexism within the civil service at all levels, in particular amongst frontline staff and key decision makers.
- The 40:60 gender balance should include women from ethnic minorities
- Resources should be given to those groups actively promoting the development of women from ethnic minorities
- In order for women to actively take part in decision making the following actions must be implemented.
- In order for women to be actively involved in decision making excellent child-care benefits and facilities should be provide
- Pension rights should continue during career breaks
- Improve arrangements for care of older and sick relatives
- Give incentives to women to be in political management positions
- Have an active government programme to promote attitude change re: gender, interculturalism, opportunities, and women’s contribution.

Human Rights of Women

- The urgent preparation of legislation to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, in particular women and children.
- The Reception and Integration Agency should include women from ethnic minorities in the planning, co-ordination and implementation of its services.
- There should be heavy involvement of ethnic minorities in the preparation of anti-racism and cultural awareness programmes and organisations already in existence should be used for their knowledge and expertise
- The promotion of the fundamental right to live in a non-racist society through the elimination of all forms of racism.

Women and the Media

Women from ethnic minorities are not adequately represented in the media. We would recommend the following:

- Women from ethnic minorities be included in the RTE Authority, TG4 Board and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission.
- Introduce positive action measures to promote positive coverage of minority women in the print media, on radio and television on a regular basis
- Provide adequate resources for the development of multi-cultural journals, newspapers, radio and television programmes
- Support the training of media skills for women from ethnic minorities
- Establish a quota system for employment of ethnic minority women in the media
- The provision of appropriate funding for the development and promotion of women from ethnic minorities from the Arts Council

The Development of Indicators

The development of gender indicators and gender-disaggregated data is necessary to measure the effectiveness of our policies and actions. These indicators must be measured against agreed timebound targets. Therefore, to act as benchmarks in monitoring ongoing progress, each of these indicators must be accompanied by timebound targets with realistic and feasible means of verification. Many of the recommendations made in this submission can form the basis of indicators.