

Women *in* Ireland



**SINN FÉIN UPDATED
POLICY DOCUMENT**
Ard Chomhairle



March 1999

Women in Ireland

**SINN FÉIN UPDATE
POLICY DOCUMENT**

March 1999

"The worker is the slave of capitalist society, the female worker is the slave of that slave." – James Connolly

Women have always played a central role in the struggle for Irish freedom. Sinn Féin would like to again pay tribute to all the women who have over the years, played such a vital role. Women have organised – often informally – around prison issues in particular. In the aftermath of the 1916 Rising it was women who took the lead and organised the Irish Volunteer Dependants' Fund. During the Civil War, women, through their activities in the Women's Prisoners' Defence League, effectively highlighted the brutality of the Cosgrave government. More recently, the Relatives Action Committees laid the foundations for the H-Block and Armagh committees through the early years of the struggle for political status.

Individual women have sustained political prisoners over many years and through financial and personal hardship. Though often not tied in to formal structures or given formal status, political solidarity work of this kind is no less political for that. It has been a crucial contribution.

Women have by and large evaded arrest and imprisonment for their republican political activities. From Anne Devlin to Countess Markievicz to Mairead Farrell, with hundreds of less known women in between, women political prisoners have at times experienced worse conditions than their male comrades. Isolation, sub-standard facilities, lack of educational opportunities and human rights violations such as strip-searching have been common. Nonetheless women have constantly asserted their right to full participation at all levels of the struggle. For example, the Armagh women participated in the dirty protest and hunger strike of 1980 despite extra gendered pressures and health implications.

Women have in many ways borne the brunt of British military occupation in Ireland. Most recently, the militarisation of

the 6 Counties has had particular implications for women. Armed military patrols and constant surveillance, for example, have seriously affected women, particularly women in isolated rural areas. Sexual harassment of nationalist women has been seen by the British army, UDR and RUC as a 'spoils of war'.

Republicans have also played a major role in advancing women's rights in Irish society. Sinn Féin is part of a heritage which has engaged the commitment of the most radical thinkers and activists in Irish history including feminists and socialists such as Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, James Connolly and Countess Markievicz.

Feminists have always had to make tactical campaigning decisions that were often seen to be in conflict with, for example, the nationalist agenda (campaigning for the vote from the British parliament), or party political agenda (petitioning the Free State government to amend the anti-women 1937 Constitution). There is never an ideal time to push for women's interests, yet women cannot afford to wait.

Sinn Féin has consistently engaged with feminist ideas, acknowledging that the common central goal of republicanism and feminism is equality for all citizens. Sinn Féin's Women's Department has played an important part over the years in putting gender issues to the fore within the party, developing progressive gender policies and aligning itself with progressive campaigns for social change. Women have had 30% representation at Ard Chomhairle level for a number of years. 35% of our delegates at the talks which led to the Agreement were women, a figure far in excess of other mixed parties.

However, much remains to be done. This document is intended to act as a catalyst for action and focus for debate to further gender equality. Accordingly, the document concludes with a discussion on developing a women-friendly, truly inclusive political culture for a new Ireland. This inevitably raises issues for Sinn Féin's current structures. As a vibrant, progressive political party with a strong community base, Sinn Féin is equal to the task.

Equality of political participation for women means ensuring that women participate equally in the decision-making structures of society. It means challenging the notion that there are differences between men and women. It means accepting that gender roles are culturally and socially constructed. It means working to dismantle the system of patriarchy which is based on the unequal distribution of social and economic resources between men and women.

It means making visible the power relations between women and men. These power relationships are often subtle or invisible. They operate in all spheres of society from the world of work where much of women's work is undervalued or unpaid and regarded as 'natural' rather than 'real' work, to violence against women which is one of the most extreme forms of control and power.

It means recognising that control and power is created and maintained by institutions such as the churches, state education and family and reinforced by attitudes about what is appropriate behaviour for women and men. All of this can be challenged and changed.

A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE

Adopting a gendered perspective means going beyond what are commonly seen as 'women's issues'. It means recognising that gender roles impact on us all, influencing our behaviour and status in society. Women have played a crucial role in the the politics of all peoples in history. The relationship between gender and republicanism must be critically discussed.

For example, republican men and women have experienced British military occupation in gendered ways. Women tend to have more invested in their home and so they experience raids as more of a personal invasion than do men. Men have been far more likely to be arrested but fear of arrest or being stopped in the street is very acute for mothers as they have primary responsibility for children. While this gendered role has afforded women some protection from arrest, it has also been used

against individual women during interrogations.

GENDER AND SOCIAL POLICY

Social policy reflects and reinforces gendered power relations between men and women. For example, ideologies the social welfare systems in Ireland are based on a 'male breadwinner' system which assumes and reinforces women's economic dependence on men.

DIVERSITY AMONG WOMEN

Women, like men, are not a homogenous group. Working-class women, Traveller women, older women, lesbians, women from ethnic minorities, refugee women, women with disabilities, rural women, women who are lone parents all experience multiple forms of oppression and discrimination.

Middle-class women, for example, in many ways have little in common with Traveller women. Nonetheless, gender discrimination is an issue for all women though it manifests itself differently in combination with other factors. Relative privilege for men based on their gender cuts across all other social divisions.

This also means that some women benefit from and collude in other women's oppression. Therefore, a gendered perspective needs to be integrated with a class analysis and a sensitivity to the other factors or identities which shape women's lives. Similarly, a class analysis is incomplete without a gender analysis. This perspective is known as socialist feminism.

WHY SOCIALIST FEMINISM?

Neglecting factors other than gender in an analysis of Irish society serves to exclude the majority of women who are also oppressed by a combination of gender and other factors and thus repeats the mistake of excluding a gender analysis in the first place.

Socialist feminism builds on the liberal feminist insight that a reformist equality agenda will advance some women within the patriarchal system, but goes beyond that to question the capitalist aspect of the system. It incorporates the radical feminist insight

that gendered inequalities in the private sphere are political.

Socialist feminism has a gendered and class framework which can accommodate other factors such as ethnic minority status. It is the logical analysis for republicans to adopt in developing our vision of a 32 county socialist republic.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

Sinn Fein has endorsed the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Ard Fheis 1995) and called for a Bill of Rights in Ireland to reflect its human rights ethos. However, the definition of human rights within this and other human rights documents is based on a gendered division between the public and private spheres. This has resulted in human rights being defined primarily as civil and political rights, and the private sphere of family life not being recognised as an area where human rights violations occur.

Most women's rights are violated within the private domestic sphere. The state must take responsibility for these rights violations – for example, domestic violence, rape and child sexual abuse. Women's rights must be acknowledged to be human rights.

PRACTICAL GENDER NEEDS AND STRATEGIC GENDER INTERESTS

A woman may not challenge sexual harassment at work (strategic gender interest) because she cannot afford to lose her job (practical gender need). Practical and strategic gender needs and interests often conflict. This can be described as a conflict between short and long-term interests. Women have to make difficult choices like this all the time. It is also a class issue as women who are better off, or highly educated will find it easier to make decisions that promote their strategic gender interests.

It is therefore unfair to judge women who make decisions which seem to undermine

their strategic or long-term gender interests. It is necessary to look at the context in which women live. While equal opportunity laws etc. are a necessary step to equality, broader issues like poverty, unequal access to education and cultural tolerance of violence against women also need to be addressed before all women can be enabled to make real choices.

MAINSTREAMING A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE

Gender proofing as an afterthought – noticing there are no women speakers when the panel has been decided, not putting on a creche because it was not in the budget – is neither credible nor acceptable. It is necessary to implement pro-active policies and mechanisms to promote gender equality. These must be subject to ongoing review to monitor their effectiveness. There needs to be greater awareness of how language can be exclusive and serves to reinforce gendered attitudes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☐ All Sinn Fein policy shall be gender-proofed and a gender perspective be mainstreamed into all areas of party policy and decision making.

☐ Sinn Fein welcomes the Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment (PAFT) guidelines introduced in the 6 counties. These guidelines are intended to ensure that policies and public services treat everyone fairly. They should be given legislative force.

☐ Any Bill of Rights needs to be written in the light of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW is a key international human rights document which incorporates a gender perspective.

Women in Ireland have been and continue to be defined primarily in relation to men; as daughters, wives and mothers. Patriarchal values in society have defined men as the moral and physical superior and the subsequent 'rightful' owner of all marital 'property', including the wife's domestic and sexual services. Children were also defined as 'property'. Right-wing religious values, from the Catholic establishment to fundamentalist Protestantism, have also given credence to this exploitation. Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution reflects this untenable position.

This value system has persisted. For example, it was only in the early 1990s that it became unlawful for a man to rape a woman if they were married. Yet, in spite of the policy makers and clergy, Irish society has changed. Around a quarter of women giving birth in Ireland today choose to do so outside of marriage. The conventional nuclear family unit with a male breadwinner can no longer be assumed to be the norm. Accordingly, family law needs to change to reflect the reality of people's lives.

MARRIAGE

While today more of the direct forms of discrimination against women within marriage may have been removed, this does not mean that a typical marriage in Ireland is now a partnership of equals. Most women are the financially dependent adult within a marriage, while also bearing the most responsibility for other family members, including children and older relatives. This often leaves women at the financial mercy of their wage-earning partner. Women can become trapped in bad or violent relationships and simply not have the resources to leave.

A woman's independent legal identity must be upheld within marriage. In the 26 counties, a woman with children 'deserting' her husband is not considered an independent person by the Department of Social Welfare. If a woman leaves her husband or insists that he leave the family home, it can effect her social welfare entitlement.

DIVORCE

Sinn Féin supports the withdrawal of the legal requirements of a fault-based divorce in the 6 counties and calls on the 26 county administration to enact similar legislation recognising 'no fault'- based divorces. Fault-based divorces promote an adversarial approach that is especially harmful to children. This type of divorce also tends to add to the duration of court proceedings.

This proves to be a financial burden on both parties, but especially dependent wives. When issuing a statement of marital breakdown, a three-month gap ensues (in the 6 counties) before the courts recognise the legitimacy of the file. This promotes acute difficulties for dependent women in regard to income. Financial assistance for the dependent wife, in many cases also a mother, is withheld until the statement is filed.

Reflection periods following the statement of marital breakdown are 9 months in the six counties (and 15 months if a child is involved under the age of 16). Sinn Féin calls on the reflection period to be substantially reduced in cases involving domestic violence.

MEDIATION

Divorce proceedings should aim at ending recrimination by concentrating on relationships for the future. Sinn Féin supports family mediation via a neutral, trained and experienced third party. While, in word, this has been promoted in the 6 counties, the British government has been reluctant to fund mediation programmes. Mediation would remove the cumbersome legal process, costly formal court proceedings, and bargaining and lawyer fees. Such an approach would also tend to be more personal and amicable.

CUSTODY OF CHILDREN

The most recent legislation dealing with children, in the 6 counties, is the Children (NI) Order 1995. Essentially, the document proclaims to place the welfare of children as paramount in all custody matters. Through its promotion of practical family assistance to parents with 'children in need', and children with disabilities, the Act has significant positive aspects. The Act's stress on

responsibility towards children, as opposed to rights over children, must be welcomed.

However, the statutory obligation to protect children is not being backed up with proper resources. Also, the Act places a tremendous amount of power in the hands of the social services. Sinn Fein supports the democratisation of these quango, governmentally appointed bodies so that they are popularly accountable to the public they serve.

As late as the 1970s, custody of children was being taken from mothers who had left their husbands and formed another relationship – in the supposed ‘moral and religious’ interest of the children. Now, in most cases, the court will award the custody of young children to the mother. In recent years, fathers are increasingly taking an active parenting role. In theory at least courts do award custody and access with the interests of the children as the paramount concern.

The Children Act (1997) in the 26 counties, with its recognition of natural fathers as guardians, needs to be implemented very carefully. In the case of single mothers who receive no support from the natural fathers during pregnancy or the early years of the child, it is wrong that these men should be considered guardians with the power to make decisions about the welfare of the child. In this case, custody rights should be solely with the mother, with custody access for the natural father being entirely up to the discretion of the mother.

In the case of unmarried couples, where they have been cohabiting at the time of birth and the natural father has developed a bond with the child, fathers should have right of access. The fitness of either parent to have the care of their children should be determined by the child’s welfare and happiness rather than on religious or quasi-religious grounds.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☐ Ordinary criminal law – concerning theft, damage, violence, rape etc. – must apply to marital relationships.

☐ Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution should be reviewed in its entirety. Article 41.2, which reads ‘In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home’ should be repealed.

☐ The 26 county act protecting women and children’s right to live in the family home should remain with the addition that the couple would be joint owners of the family home, whether the woman’s name was on the deeds or not.

☐ A woman’s contribution to a marriage should entitle her to an equal share of the family income and marital property.

☐ Married women working within the home should have the right to an independent income.

☐ A woman should under law be able to sue her husband if he should fail to make available to her an equitable share of the family income.

☐ Women should be entitled to full and immediate social welfare upon filing for divorce.

☐ Access to free legal aid in all separation and divorce cases should be based on individual rather than family income.

☐ Sinn Fein supports the introduction of Family Law courts to make the legal procedures involved as simple and as unthreatening as possible.

☐ Mediation programmes should be resourced as a priority.

☐ Resources should be made available to health boards to train personnel to implement the Children Act (1997) and Children Order (1995).

☐ There should be no legal obligation on a mother to give a child her husband's surname, or disclose the identity of the biological father.

Poverty affects a third of the population in Ireland. People in Ireland can be said to be poor when, through lack of resources, they are excluded from the ordinary living patterns and activities of society, and face a constant struggle to live with dignity. Poverty affects 38% of households and 37% of children in the 6 counties and disproportionately affects Catholics.

Lack of access to an adequate income is the primary cause of poverty. Economic dependence on men, structural barriers to equal pay when working and inadequate social welfare benefits make women particularly susceptible. Employment does not necessarily mean an escape from poverty. Access to services is another important indicator. Rural women, Travellers, lone parents, disabled and homeless women are therefore especially vulnerable to poverty.

IMPACT ON WOMEN

Women carry the main burden of poverty in Ireland. Official assessments of poverty treat the household as a unit. There is insufficient research into income distribution within families, but it is fair to assume in some cases men withhold money from women, and women are likely to choose to go without for their children and partner. A 1989 survey in an area of chronically high unemployment in Dublin found the nutrient intake of women was lower than men and children. Therefore, it is likely the actual figure for women living in poverty is higher than official figures suggest.

Poverty is time consuming and takes a physical toll. Lack of labour-saving household devices and limited access to transport, for example, impact more on women than men.

Poverty affects expectations and access to education and training, quality housing and the law and thus repeats itself through generations. Poor women are more likely to give birth prematurely and have babies with low birth weight. As a result ill-health in poor families is more likely in childhood. Women living in poverty have less access to preventative health care and health services generally.

RURAL WOMEN

Rural women are frequently marginalised in Irish society and typically live in poverty. Access to many services others take for granted is often denied them. Lack of access to public transport, local hospitals, childcare and educational facilities is typical in rural areas. Social isolation is a problem with significant negative implications for women's health and general well-being. In the 6 Counties, the lack of support networks has particularly affected rural women experiencing security force harassment. This general lack of infrastructure and facilities in rural areas must be urgently redressed.

COSTS OF LIVING

The 1994 Living in Ireland survey found one third of households experiencing basic deprivation had severe debt problems, 40% could not afford new clothes, 25% could not afford a warm waterproof coat and 21% could not afford to eat meat every second day. Basic commodities in the 6 counties such as fuel and electricity cost more than in Britain despite incomes being lower.

UNEMPLOYMENT

Catholic women in the 6 counties are nearly twice as likely as Protestant women to be unemployed. Nearly 16% of women in the 26 counties are officially unemployed, though this again is probably an underestimate. 26% of lone mothers in the 26 counties are unemployed. Disabled women are more likely to be unemployed than their male counterparts and less likely to be receiving training for employment. Long-term unemployment is more likely for all these groups.

SOCIAL WELFARE

Women are not defined as independent citizens within the social welfare systems, North and South. They are treated as dependants of a male breadwinner. For example, some women are prevented from registering as unemployed depending on their husband's earnings. The fiasco of the 26 county's Department of Social Welfare's attempt to implement the European Community Directive on Sex Equality

illustrated the impossibility of gender equality reform within the present system (which is based on the British model). Already impoverished women became caught in a poverty trap.

The Poverty Trap describes a situation where a rise in gross income can lead to a fall in net income. If, for example, a woman starts earning when her spouse is unemployed, they can end up with less money coming in. This acts as a disincentive to work and disproportionately affects poor families.

The social security system fails to treat claimants with the respect and dignity they deserve, hounding them to look for jobs which do not exist. It also fails to make people aware of all the benefits they are entitled to. For example, despite British government claims to the contrary, it is estimated that many people entitled to Disability Living Allowance in the 6 counties have not claimed it.

The Child Support Agency's primary aim is to save the British government money. It has been used to abuse women. Child benefit rates are inadequate.

HOUSING

Good housing is essential for good health and well-being. This is particularly true for women as they tend to spend more time at home than anybody else. Cuts in spending on public housing impact disproportionately on women. Guaranteed access to quality housing is especially important for women escaping domestic violence. Lone parents are frequently allocated inadequate housing. Both groups and poor people generally are vulnerable to unscrupulous landlords providing substandard accommodation.

LONE PARENTS

The 26 counties has seen the highest increase in lone parent families in the EU. The average income of lone parent families in the 26 counties is 59% of other families with dependent children, the lowest in Europe. Maintenance payments from fathers are not enforced effectively. Often such fathers are

also living in poverty, and so child benefit needs to reflect the real cost of raising children.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Despite the marginalisation of women in poverty and the many obstacles to be overcome daily just to survive, women in poor communities have been to the forefront of community development.

A coherent all-Ireland anti-poverty strategy will target funding towards communities and areas experiencing poverty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☐ All social security benefits, North and South, need to be upgraded to provide a basic minimum standard of living and should be index-linked so as to rise with the cost of living.

☐ The tax system needs to be reformed so as not to penalise those living in poverty. High earners should carry a higher tax burden.

☐ Taxation on basic necessities such as fuel should be abolished.

☐ Disincentives to employment must be removed from both social welfare systems.

☐ Social security staff should be obliged to make actual and potential claimants aware of all benefits they may be entitled to.

☐ The Child Support Agency in the 6 counties should be abolished.

☐ Child benefit should be increased.

☐ Accessible and affordable public transport systems need to be developed and resourced.

☐ More resources need to be allocated to public housing.

☐ In the long-term, both social security systems must be restructured to define women as independent citizens regardless of their relationship to a man. Moreover,

the two social security systems in Ireland must be fully integrated so that differentiated and unequal benefits do not exist between North and South.

The education system has the potential to be an effective vehicle for change in any society. Its influence upon the life of each individual, from nursery schooling through to higher education and vocational training, is critical. Education has the power to either reinforce or to transform the status quo. As such, it is a crucial area of work for those seeking to effect long-lasting and substantial change in the lives of Irish women.

The legacy of inadequate Government spending on schools, North and South, with recent additional cut-backs influencing class sizes and available resources, has led to a general sense of disillusionment throughout the educational system. Current pupil/teacher ratios are not conducive to basic learning requirements, let alone to enabling teachers to challenge gender discrimination in the class-room.

THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Recent trends in second level education throughout Ireland demonstrate that whilst girls out-perform boys in most subjects, gender differences are still apparent in subject choice and subsequent career choice. Research by both the Economic and Social Research Council and Equal Opportunities Commission shows that whilst girls at G.C.S.E/G.C.E, A'Level, Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate levels do better than boys, more boys continue to take science, technology and maths subjects. These gender differences persist into third level education and occupation.

In fact, the teaching profession itself is showing signs of gender schism, due to the lack of a consistent gender perspective in teacher training policy. The Equal Opportunities Commission has estimated that, based on current trends, primary school teaching could become an exclusively female occupation within the next fifty years, with fewer women in second and third level education, and even fewer in academic management structures. Research indicates that neither teacher nor pupil attitudes around this problem are being sufficiently questioned. Thus, discrepancies along

gender lines are being upheld, and in some cases actively reinforced, by unquestioned assumptions and prejudices within the educational system at all levels.

CURRICULUM CONTENT

The definition of "education should be broadened to incorporate the whole range of pupils gifts and abilities, vocational and creative as well as academic. Giving greater responsibility to students themselves, by means of Peer Education programmes, would empower and encourage young people to take an active interest in their own learning. Women's Studies and subjects dealing with identity, diversity and the environment, should not be relegated to third level and adult education. Second level education is a formative time in the shaping of attitudes and beliefs about society; thus students should be offered as holistic an education as possible. The mainstreaming of a gender perspective at this time is crucial if current inequalities are to be seriously addressed. Widespread and latent sex stereotyping can be formally and effectively challenged by introducing gender awareness and career guidance programmes, alongside traditional subjects, and by mainstreaming equality in future policy-making and educational strategy.

TRANSFER TEST

The Transfer Test (11+) is widely regarded as promoting segregation and discrimination in schooling, both on the basis of class and gender, leading to later under-achievement and low self-esteem for many. Differentiation between children made at such an early age, and on academic grounds alone, should not be taken as representative of a child's ability or potential. Yet, because of the Transfer Test, approximately 65% of children are unable to attend grammar schools, which achieve a higher rate of success in public examinations. Quality education should not be contingent upon the ability to pay.

SEX EDUCATION

Full sex education for both boys and girls should be standardised within the school

curriculum, North and South. The enforced ignorance around issues of sexual health advocated by groups such as Family Solidarity, is both unrealistic and dangerous. Girls in particular suffer from a lack of understanding about their own bodies and sexuality. All second level students should be fully informed about issues such as sex and sexuality, relationships, contraception, abortion, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS. Both girls and boys should also be educated about rape, domestic violence, and sexual abuse.

STUDENT LOANS

The Student Loan system is a blatant attempt to privatise third level education, by making it accessible only to those who can afford to pay. This is unacceptable in a society where approximately half the adults still have either minimal or no basic qualifications. Young people emerging from second level education gain entry to a degree in the knowledge that they are incurring serious long-term debt. Because of this, third level education is no longer an option for many. For others, degree choice is affected by the need to ensure a job. Thus, only those with the luxury of substantial parental support can afford to enter third level education on their own terms.

ADULT/COMMUNITY EDUCATION

The most notable innovation in education in recent years has been the growth of adult and community education, within which women form a majority. Yet, adult education remains the least well resourced, least prestigious and most peripheral educational sector. The growth in accredited course provision in local communities, through purpose built out-reach centres, community centres and women's centres, has proven invaluable for women returners. This is particularly so where childcare is provided. Yet, in too many cases such educational programmes are under resourced, under-valued, and made inaccessible by lack of appropriate childcare.

CHILDCARE

Childcare provision is an intrinsic part of

bringing women back into education and training. As such, it should be funded by Government at all centres where day-time G.C.S.E and Intermediate and Leaving Certificate courses are available; at all further and higher educational establishments; and at all community, out-reach and women's centres.

Initiatives such as Springvale Educational Village, offering non-traditional routes into higher education, are to be welcomed. The empowerment of local communities through education and training is crucial for their economic and social development. Low paid and part-time workers (of whom women again form the majority), must be ensured equal access to adult education facilities. Employers at present tend only to support full-time permanent employees who wish to pursue education and training courses. In a period dubbed "the learning age" by the British government, research undertaken in the North of Ireland showed that 69% of part-time women workers received no training from their employers.

It is important therefore, as research has shown, to retain a distinct gender awareness within community education and development. Otherwise, the status quo is merely reproduced with gendered power imbalances and discrimination unchallenged. Courses and training programmes based around issues of specific concern to women's development should be afforded equal status to those designed for industry and employment. Mainstreaming gender equality in the distribution of European Structural Funds is also crucial.

TRAINING

Cuts to the North's ACE programme in 1997-98 have proved particularly damaging to women, who comprise a high proportion of participants. Many ACE workers are employed by women's centres. The reduction of 25% in the overall number of ACE jobs has clearly impacted upon the availability of jobs and training for women.

In the South, FAS continues to discriminate against women in selection for training courses, by giving priority to those who are

signing on as unemployed, and receiving payments in their own right. This excludes many women whose partners are claiming benefits on their behalf as dependent adults. Women must be entitled to quality education and training opportunities as individuals in their own right, regardless of marital status or domestic circumstances.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Immediate measures:

☐ The immediate abolition in the North of the Transfer Test (11+) and replacement by a fairer grading system.

☐ Increased Government spending on school facilities and resources, particularly in those areas in the North falling under the TSN (Targeting Social Need) guidelines, alongside proactive measures to reduce current teacher/pupil ratios in all schools and as a matter of urgency.

☐ In line with commitments made in the Agreement, a statutory duty to be placed upon the Department of Education, to encourage and facilitate Irish medium education, in line with current provision for integrated education.

☐ Improved career guidance at all levels of education, from secondary onward, with a view to reversing current trends toward "traditional" subjects by both boys and girls.

☐ Improved and co-ordinated equal opportunity training for educationalists at all levels, particularly during teacher training, to address the on going division of the teaching profession into Primary = female, Secondary/Higher = male. Gender awareness programmes should be standard within teacher

training, to equip all teachers to deal with the problem of sex-role stereotyping in the class-room.

☐ Comprehensive and on-going sex education programmes to be delivered in all schools throughout Ireland. Education on issues such as domestic violence and sexual abuse to be provided to all secondary level students.

☐ Greater accessibility of provision by adult education and training providers to accommodate women returners. This entails most urgently the availability of creche facilities at all further and higher education institutions, Government training centres, and out-reach/community centres. It also requires that women's right to return to learning is not determined either by their marital status or their position as part-time workers.

☐ Cuts to the ACE programme and in student grants should be urgently reconsidered, not only in terms of their long-term repercussions for social and community development, but in view of their implications specifically for women students and unemployed women.

The insights and advances of the women's movement should be brought to bear in community education and development strategies. The Centre for Adult and Community Education estimates that over 80% of extra-mural course participants and almost 100% of local unpaid co-ordinators are women. Yet these women are not visible in established power structures and positions of influence. Therefore it should be ensured that public funds be channelled into programmes such as the Youth Action "Community Leadership" project for young mothers.

■ Long-term measures:

☐ Extensive research to be conducted, at all levels of education and on an all-Ireland basis, to determine the extent of gender inequality, in terms of practice, curriculum content, attitudes and underachievement.

☐ The allocation of sufficient resources for the long-term monitoring and review of all reform policies undertaken. The co-ordination of strategy and dissemination of findings on an all-Ireland basis, to ensure that best practice prevails with regard to overcoming gender inequality in education.

☐ Ultimately, to move beyond a strategy of reform to one of

emancipation for women, by means of the education system. This will entail broadening the definition of "education", to enable young people as well as adult learners to question and re-think the entire social, cultural and economic ethos which upholds unequal power relations between women and men, as well as between classes, cultures and creeds. The purpose of such an innovation would be the restructuring of society itself, to accommodate the voice and experience of women, rather than "fixing" women's lives to accommodate the system. Only when our young people are taught the freedom and responsibility of re-visioning their own society, will education have truly become a force for movement and change, and especially for women.

The numbers of women working outside the home have steadily increased over the last 20 years, particularly in the 6 counties, where women make up over half of the paid workforce. Estimates put women at 36% of the labour force in the 26 counties in 1994, though this figure probably underestimates casual and part-time work. Women's pay has remained at around 75% of men's.

Women also represent the vast majority of the unpaid workforce in Ireland. In addition to their underpaid employment, women save the state millions of pounds every year in childcare and caring for sick, disabled and older relatives. In return, they are undervalued and experience poverty disproportionately.

The development of low-wage economies in the North and South has impacted adversely on men and women. Employment policies still take male full-time guaranteed employment and conventional nuclear families as the norm. This no longer reflects the reality. In 1985 three surveys in the 6 counties found the majority of conventional family units had two wage earners. Women can no longer be presumed to be economically dependent on men.

Because women tend to take time out to have children, work part-time in low-status jobs, and are under-represented in senior positions, they are less likely to get in-job training which would enable them to advance up the career ladder (if promotion opportunities exist in their job). Women, particularly those in middle management, still come up against the 'glass ceiling' whereby promotion beyond a certain level eludes them because of their gender. It all adds up to an incredible waste of valuable human resources.

GENDER, CLASS AND SECTARIANISM

Differences in Catholic and Protestant male unemployment have consistently been identified as the major equality issue in the 6 counties by policy makers, academics and political parties. The issue of employment inequalities between women and men has been given less priority. Yet gendered and sectarian factors interact in complex ways.

For example, Catholic men are overrepresented in 'women's' (i.e. low-status) jobs such as nursing in comparison to Protestant men. Similarly, the regional variations in employment and low pay need to be taken into account for a true picture of employment inequalities in the 32 counties.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Catholic women are almost twice as likely to be unemployed as Protestant women. A higher education qualification for Catholics narrows the gap only slightly. Catholic women are disadvantaged in relation to Catholic men. Catholics generally tend to stay unemployed longer than Protestants. The Equal Pay Act (Northern Ireland) and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and Order 1976 have not worked.

The Employment Equality Bill and Equal Status Bill (1997) in the 26 counties represents an advance in combating discrimination on many levels. Discrimination in employment is prohibited on grounds of gender, marital status, religion, age, disability and race.

'WOMEN'S' WORK

There has been a tendency to dismiss women's work outside the home as 'pocket money'. This undermines the fact that many women are forced to take badly paid part-time work to provide their families with basics, never mind luxuries. This attitude also questions women's right to fulfilling work outside the home.

Women and men's employment are highly segregated. This is complicated in the 6 counties with slight differences between Catholic and Protestant women's occupations. Generally, however, women are overrepresented in service industries, particularly health and education, and are a tiny minority in agricultural and construction. With the exception of women who receive a high level of training before they enter the job market, gender is the main factor deciding the type and status of women's work. Ability and skill are less important.

Increasingly, the jobs being created target cheap female labour. Part-time work

is increasing. Multinationals in Ireland are major employers of women in predominantly unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. Homeworking continues to be a working-class female occupation. Homeworkers are very vulnerable to exploitation.

'FLEXIBLE' WORKING CONDITIONS OR CASUAL LABOUR?

Part-time work frequently offers flexibility in terms of opportunities to renegotiate shifts, or work around school hours, for example. Women often need this kind of flexibility because they take primary responsibility for childcare. Part-time and homeworkers have little job security and limited job-related benefits. Health and safety are compromised for these workers.

Women working part-time are unlikely to get opportunities to work overtime whereas men in full-time jobs do. The latter, of course, assumes in the case of family men that women will provide unpaid childcare. This widens the gap between women's and men's actual wages even further than official figures suggest.

LOW PAY

Women are disproportionately affected by low pay. For example, more than 85,000 women in the 6 counties earn less than £4.00 an hour compared to fewer than 40,000 men in the same wage bracket. Young women and young people generally are also vulnerable to low pay exploitation.

A minimum wage is clearly therefore a gender issue and essential to help bridge the gap between women's and men's pay at the lower end of the wages scale.

MATERNITY LEAVE

At present women in the 6 counties fare better than their Southern counterparts with regard to maternity leave with fathers being discriminated against all round. The Employment Equality Agency (EEA) in Dublin received 79 complaints about alleged pregnancy discrimination in 1997. Part-time workers have no entitlements to maternity leave.

PENSIONS

The British government recently equalised men's and women's retirement ages to 65 when it should have made it 60 years. Women are far less likely than men to build up contributions throughout their working lives and many women find in older age they have to live on derisory state pensions.

TRADE UNIONS

Women make up 44% of trade union membership in the 6 counties and 37% in the 26 counties. Reasons why women are less likely to get involved in trade unions than men include; domestic commitments, a perception that unions are more interested in defending male workers interests (which may conflict with those of female workers) and the poor representation of women at higher levels within trade unions. Many part-time and casual workers (predominantly women) are prohibited from joining trade unions. Despite efforts in some unions to implement structures to promote women's participation, women's interests are not being fully represented.

CHILDCARE

Lack of quality affordable childcare is a major barrier to women gaining employment. A 1997 survey by the National Women's Council of Ireland found that 83% of respondents believed there should be tax relief/allowances for childcare costs. 52% said childcare should be funded totally by the state.

Clearly, current provision falls far short of these demands. Lack of monitoring of the quality of childcare in the private sector is a particular problem in the 26 counties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☐ More research is needed into the multiple factors affecting employment inequalities between women and men in Ireland.

☐ The Equal Pay Act (Northern Ireland) and Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and Order 1976 need to be replaced by simplified effective

legislation. Sinn Fein endorses the EOCNI's 1997 paper 'The Sex Discrimination Legislation: Recommendations for Change'.

☐ The Employment Equality Bill (1997) should be amended to include provision for hypothetical pay comparators, thus enabling women who cannot point to a male in a comparable job to use hypothetical comparators to argue for better pay and conditions.

☐ The state should actively promote the breaking down of gender segregation between 'women's' and 'men's' jobs.

☐ A national minimum wage should be introduced.

☐ All working women should be entitled to paid maternity leave. Legislation should be introduced, North and South, enabling parents to avail of up to two years job-protected paid leave between them on the birth of a child. Equalising paternity and maternity leave will result in less discrimination against women in employment practice.

☐ Retirement age should be brought down to 60 years. State pensions should take women's unpaid work over the years into account.

☐ Childcare should be tax free and in families/communities affected by poverty, provided by the state. An all-Ireland strategy should be developed with responsibility in one governmental department to implement quality, standardised state funded childcare in the long term.

☐ An all-Ireland audit of women's unpaid work should be carried out with view to establishing a minimum income for all citizens.

☐ Employment policies must be developed with a long term strategy of creating people and family friendly working structures so everyone can earn a living wage while also having time for family and leisure.

☐ Employment equality, equal pay and sex discrimination legislation should be fully integrated, North and South, providing equal protection for women in Ireland.

have left the relationship. The negative effects on children are enormous.

■ Police response

A pro-arrest policy is welcome and should help create a cultural shift towards domestic violence being seen as a crime.

The lack of trust nationalist and Traveller women have in the RUC undermines their effectiveness. Similarly the Garda Síochána does not have a good relationship with Travellers and inner city communities which leaves women in these communities at particular risk.

■ Agency responses

It is crucial that Agency providers, GPs etc. are trained so as not to act as another barrier to women leaving violent relationships. The guiding principle for service providers should be to act as advocates for women in domestic violence situations. The alternative is collusion in the continuation of the violence.

The inter-agency approach being adopted North and South is a very positive step.

■ Community response

Women are frequently blamed for breaking up their relationship instead of their violent partners. Internalised gendered cultural ideals about marriage may result in women staying in violent relationships for years. The point at which women try to leave is when they are in most physical danger. Like any other relationship, the break-up may be a drawn-out process.

Therefore it is very important that family, friends and the wider community support women in violent relationships and hold violent and abusive men accountable for their behaviour instead of blaming women.

Women in republican communities have experienced pressure not only not to 'break up the family', but also, by extension, the 'republican family'. Cultural pressures on Traveller, Asian and Chinese women function to make it more difficult for them to leave violent relationships. They also have extra obstacles to contend with when availing of support services.

RAPE

Rape can be defined as an act of forced sexual violation motivated by a desire to humiliate the victim. It is an abuse of power and a human rights violation. It is overwhelmingly used by men against women and children. It takes place in and is sanctioned by a context of gender inequality.

The majority of rape survivors – estimates vary from 70% to 90% – know their rapist. 22% of rapes reported to the Garda Síochána in 1997 occurred within families.

Rape and sexual assault remain hugely underreported, though reporting of these crimes is starting to rise. The few who do pursue legal redress often find the Director of Public Prosecutions has decided not to prosecute, with no reason given.

■ Legal issues

The legal definitions of rape, North and South, have recently been extended to include marital rape. There is still no legal definition of consent. Thus, defence lawyers try to present the victim as a woman who would have consented to sex, by drawing on her past sexual history. This is allowed in the South at the judge's discretion.

Usually there are no independent witnesses to a rape. Judges in rape cases in the South can still warn the jury of the 'dangers' of believing a woman's uncorroborated testimony (in no circumstances does this apply to men). Judges are thus in a powerful position to influence the outcome by effectively suggesting the woman is lying.

Rape victims in the South still have no independent representation. They appear as witnesses for the State.

In 1994, less than 10% of reported rapes in the 6 counties resulted in convictions. Fewer than half the rapes reported to the Gardai in 1997 had resulted in criminal proceedings by mid-1998. Sentencing is relatively lenient further reinforcing cultural ideas that rape is not really a 'serious' crime.

■ 'Rehabilitation'

In mid-1997, fewer than a dozen of the 30 sex offenders in Arbour Hill prison were

participating in treatment programmes.

Groups in the voluntary sector pick up the pieces. In 1997, Dublin Rape Crisis Centre received four times as many reports of rape as the Gardai. Rape Crisis Centres and the Nexus Institute in the 6 counties provide confidential support and counselling often with insufficient resources. Only 5 out of 11 rape crisis centres in the 26 counties can afford to pay all their staff.

OTHER FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

■ Strip-searching

Strip-searching is direct state violence against women and a human rights abuse. It is designed primarily to humiliate and is an affront to human dignity. Thousands of strip-searches have been carried out, primarily on women. Claims of security justification are bogus. Nothing remotely resembling a security threat has ever been found.

■ Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment can be defined as unwanted sexual attention, involving intimidation and bullying and is an abuse of power. Sexual harassment complaints to the Employment Equality Agency in the 26 counties outnumbered complaints about working conditions in 1996. It is now prohibited in the 26 county Equal Status Bill (1997). Legislation is welcome but a culture of intolerance of sexual harassment needs to develop to prevent it occurring. Sexual harassment is found in all spheres of life; not just the workplace.

■ Pornography

Sinn Féin endorses the Campaign against Pornography and Censorship's definition of pornography as follows:

'...the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words which includes one or more of the following - women presented as dehumanised objects; enjoying humiliation and pain, tied up, cut, or mutilated; shown with severed body parts; penetrated by object or animal.' (1989)

■ Extent and Effects

Research in North America and some European countries suggest 60% of men regularly use pornography. There is ongoing controversy about the link between pornography and other violence against women. Establishing a direct causal link is perhaps impossible.

Controlled psychological studies consistently suggest following exposure to violent pornography, around 50% of men say they would rape a woman if they could get away with it. Some time later, they are still more likely to think that women enjoy rape, or want to be raped. Men exposed to pornography are more likely to become sexually aroused at non-sexual violence being used against women, for example, when they see a woman being beaten.

Women themselves testify that pornography sometimes influences and adds to the types of violence they experience.

■ Violence against lesbians

A 1995 Combat Poverty Agency survey found 25% of gays and lesbians had experienced physical assault and 41% had received threats of violence. The survey did not have a gender breakdown but it is clear large numbers of lesbian women experience violence because of homophobia.

■ Prostitution

Prostitution is a form of violence against women. Though some women choose to work selling sex, the vast majority do so because of lack of choices. Criminalising women forced into this position because of economic necessity is simply wrong. Prostitutes are extremely vulnerable to other forms of violence.

■ Refugee women

Refugee women are often fleeing gender persecution and belong to a group which is particularly vulnerable to violence. Yet, upon arrival in Ireland, refugee women are ill-treated by immigration authorities and police. This is unacceptable.

RELATED ISSUES

■ Mandatory reporting

Figures from the Rape Crisis Centre in Dublin reveal just over half their calls in '96-'97 related to sexual abuse in childhood. Many child sexual abuse victims are raped in adulthood.

We endorse the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and rape crisis centres' view that mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse is necessary. The safety of children must be our paramount consideration. Irish society has already failed thousands of children in this regard.

Mandatory reporting of adult rape and sexual abuse is a different matter however. Adults who disclose sexual abuse are not necessarily ready to initiate legal proceedings. Reporting child sexual abuse in adulthood is different when the survivor is no longer in danger from the abuser. Mandatory reporting in these instances would likely act as a deterrent to disclosure of the abuse.

■ Media

The media reporting of crimes of violence against women frequently dwells on aspects of the woman's private life and reinforces gender stereotypes. The media needs to take more responsibility given its influential role.

RECOMMENDATIONS

■ Domestic violence

☐ Woman's Aid North and South should be properly resourced by government and recognised as models of good practice with input into all policy decisions on violence against women.

☐ The number of refuge places should be increased as an immediate priority, particularly in the 26 counties.

☐ Permanent safe housing should be available to women escaping violent relationships.

☐ The Family Homes and Domestic Violence (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 is progressive but concern must be expressed at the proposal to allow third parties to intervene legally. Women's groups should be consulted before decisions are made in this regard.

☐ The Domestic Violence Act (1996) should be amended in light of the recommendations in the Report of the Working Party on the Legal and Judicial Process for Victims of Sexual and other crimes against Women and Children.

☐ Women from ethnic minorities, rural and disabled women are disadvantaged when availing of services. Resources should be provided to correct this imbalance.

☐ Sinn Fein endorses the Zero Tolerance National Strategy Document (1995) produced by Woman's Aid in Dublin and the Report of the Working Party on the Legal and Judicial Process for Victims of Sexual and other crimes against Women and Children.

☐ The Task Force Report on Domestic Violence in the South should be fully implemented and resourced.

■ Rape

☐ Rape law should be changed to include oral and anal penetration by an object.

☐ Sinn Fein has long called for separate legal representation for victims of rape and sexual assault and calls on the 26 county government to quickly honour its commitment to introduce it.

☐ A woman's sexual history and private life should not be admissible evidence in court.

☐ Consent should be defined legally.

☐ All rape and sexual assault cases should be held in camera.

☐ The rule relating to corroboration in the 26 counties should be abolished.

☐ Training for judges, police and the legal profession is urgently needed.

☐ Rape crisis centres must be properly resourced as a priority.

☐ We welcome the 26 county government's commitment to establish a register of sexual offenders and introduce effective treatment programmes. These should be implemented as a matter of urgency.

☐ Counselling programmes for sex offenders should be obligatory and monitored properly as to their effectiveness.

■ Other forms of violence against women

☐ Strip-searching should be abolished immediately.

☐ More research is needed into the use of pornography in Ireland. Censorship is not the answer to undermining pornography. An integrated approach to preventing and eliminating male violence against women generally will contribute significantly to undermining it however.

☐ Prostitution should be decriminalised and be viewed as a taxable occupation with workers rights and benefits, including regular health check-ups.

☐ The Gender Guidelines for treatment of Women Asylum Seekers drafted by the London based Refugee Legal Group should be adopted as a basis for good practice.

■ Related issues

☐ Mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse should be introduced immediately.

☐ A Code of Practice for reporting violence against women should be drawn up with women's groups and adhered to by journalists.

Health care systems reflect gender inequalities in stark ways. Doctors are overwhelmingly men and nurses women. Nursing is a greatly undervalued profession. Doctors, by contrast, are powerful figures and often have an intimidating effect. Women are the primary users of health services and waiting lists are long and waiting rooms overcrowded. 'Quick-fix' solutions such as over-prescription of antibiotics and tranquillisers are commonplace.

Women's susceptibility to poverty and domestic violence increases their likelihood of suffering ill-health. While improvements in and adequate resourcing of the health services are vital and should be given priority, Sinn Féin recognises that changes in women's socio-economic status are also necessary before all women can look forward to healthier lives.

HEPATITIS C

The Hepatitis C scandal in the 26 counties is a disgraceful example of negligence and incompetence in blood transfusion practice. This was compounded by the refusal by government to accept responsibility and provide adequate compensation.

The scandal unfolded when women who had received Anti-D treatment in the 1970s found they had contracted Hepatitis C, despite knowledge of possible risks within the BTSB. The 'burden of proof' currently rests with the sufferer, or the sufferer's family, to prove that Hepatitis C was contracted, directly or indirectly, through Anti-D. This ignores the fact that many medical files have been destroyed. The amendment to the health bill in February 1996 does not adequately deal with the key issue of sufferers receiving free treatment.

SMOKING

Smoking remains the leading cause of chronic illness and premature death among adults. Despite many warnings about the dangers of smoking, the number of women smokers remains very high. This is particularly true of teenage girls. Some research suggests that women become more emotionally dependent on smoking

than men do and that they find it harder to stop. Yet women run special risks from smoking.

Not only is coronary heart disease and cancer higher in smokers, but also women who smoke in pregnancy run a higher risk of miscarriage and more often have babies of lower birth weight. Women who smoke and are on the pill run an even higher risk of heart disease, especially if older than 35. Oral cancer is on the increase. Lung cancer is also increasing in women.

BREAST AND CERVICAL CANCER

Breast cancer is the most common fatal cancer for women. Free breast screening is available in the 6 counties to women between 50 and 64. Yet women over 64 are most likely to be affected, and women under 50 are also vulnerable.

Cervical cancer is a very slow growing cancer, taking from 5 to 20 years to develop. Therefore, it is 100% curable if caught at the early stages. Every woman, once she becomes sexually active, should have a cervical smear every two years. The National Cervical Screening Programme in the 6 counties aims at detecting cervical cancer early and has had significant success. Current uptake rates for cervical screening are registering at 65-70% in the EHSSB and up to 80% in the NHSSB.

However, due to continuous cutbacks in the 26 county health service, women's lives are being put at risk. Unless women have the financial resources to go private, they are faced with a minimum waiting list of six months to obtain a smear and anything up to 16 weeks or more for the results to come back. This is unacceptable.

OLDER WOMEN

The number of older women amongst the population is rising, and statistics suggest that this trend is going to continue well into the next century. Women live longer than men and are more likely to experience poverty throughout their lives and particularly after retirement. The life expectancy of the older population in the 26 counties is one of the lowest in the EU.

The growth of the older population

being met with limited funding, and subsequently institutionalized neglect is displayed to those who do not meet extreme requirements. Some symptoms which are perfectly treatable are put down to 'old age' and not acted on. Old age and disease are not and need not be synonymous. There must be a pro-active avoidance of ageism in the health services.

MENTAL HEALTH

Approximately 18% of Irish women, particularly from economically neglected urban areas, are continually at risk or suffer from mental illness. Depression is a major source of ill health in Ireland, with women twice as likely as men to suffer from it. Traditional patriarchal explanations have centred on biological and hormonal factors to explain this discrepancy.

However, mental illness amongst women must be viewed in the context of women's socio-economic and personal environment and position in Irish society. Carers, for example, are overwhelmingly women. They provide unpaid and undervalued care for relatives, often for many years, frequently at the expense of their own professional and personal lives, and are six times more likely than anyone else to have a mental breakdown.

PREVENTATIVE MEDICINE

Preventative medicine is an underdeveloped area accessible only to a few. There are just two Well Woman Centres in Ireland. Their holistic self-help approach is one to be promoted and made accessible to all women.

ALL-IRELAND WOMEN'S HEALTH PROMOTION STRATEGY

Complementary to the above strategy for the advancement of women's health, and in the spirit of 'cross border co-operation' under the terms of the 'Belfast Agreement', Sinn Fein proposes the drawing up, documentation and distribution of women's guidelines for a healthier lifestyle. Such a document should be the result of a co-ordinated and collective effort by all the

health boards throughout the 32 counties and women's organisations, who are established at both local and national levels.

This comprehensive document would seek to warn women of the various diseases and illnesses which they are vulnerable to at specific times in their lives and what they can do to avoid or prevent them. It should be funded by both governments, and available through mail delivery and accessible free of charge at GPs, hospitals, family planning clinics and women's centres.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☐ The state needs to provide more financial resources for health services in Ireland, and services more attuned to women's specific needs. Carers work should be recognised and valued with a proper wage structure in place.

☐ Sinn Fein calls for an independent, non-governmental inquiry to investigate the Hepatitis-C scandal and make recommendations about personal, institutional and governmental accountability.

☐ All Hepatitis C sufferers who contracted it through blood transfusions must have free access to medical facilities and be compensated by the 26 county government, with minimal onus on the victim, or the victim's family in the case that the sufferer is dead, of the legal 'burden of proof'.

☐ Sinn Fein calls on the 26 county government to implement a cervical cancer screening programme similar to the 6 county model.

☐ Breast cancer screening must be free to all women over 30 and easily accessible.

☐ Equality training is necessary for all health care

professionals as well as more specialised care and resources for older people's health needs.

☐

Health Board Women's Health Advisory Committees should be set up in the 6 counties to co-ordinate with those in the 26 counties.

☐

A pro-active preventative health care approach would

incorporate the following:

- resources for new Well Woman centres and existing and new community based health projects throughout the 32 counties
- the establishment of local, and confidential counselling services
- women-friendly recreation and leisure facilities, outdoor and indoor.

The extent to which women in a society control their own reproduction is a measure of that society's attitude towards women's rights and, therefore, human rights. In order for women to enjoy full citizenship and thus self-determination, it is crucial that we create conditions which allow all women to expand their role in society beyond those traditionally assigned to them. While men in Irish society are increasingly involved in decisions regarding family planning and in the work of child-rearing, women are still primarily responsible and, as such, are often restricted from taking equal part in other activities which give meaning, express creativity, and provide fulfillment and a sense of control over their lives. Lack of control over reproduction means lack of choices in life.

The effect of partition on social progress in Ireland is well documented elsewhere and the domination of conservative elements in both states has had particularly devastating consequences for reproduction policies. The church's influence on state policy has led to reproduction issues being debated on moral terms rather than as health issues. Sinn Féin has long advocated the separation of church and state.

Irish society is undergoing rapid change. A public opinion poll of twelve EU countries from 1997 shows a liberal attitude from respondents in the 26 counties. For instance, two-thirds of respondents were in favour of sex education in schools and family planning advice, putting Ireland 13% above the European average.

STATISTICS

In 1994, the Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) identified a marked lack of data concerning most issues relevant to reproductive health care in the 26 counties. Accurate statistics on a range of issues that would be considered basic prerequisites for planning women's health care were unavailable in Ireland. Accordingly, non-governmental organisations such as the IFPA are using valuable resources to collect data on a range of issues and to monitor reproductive health care providers. Any responsible policy on reproductive health

care must include data collection and monitoring of services.

ACCESS TO CONTRACEPTION

While access to a full range of contraceptive methods is national policy in the 26 counties, in reality the implementation of the policy is patchy. Outside of Dublin and the major cities, access to and choice of family planning services are limited. In rural areas, young people are particularly affected by these limitations which may mean, for instance, that they are not assured of privacy and confidentiality when they seek information about birth control.

Provision is also inconsistent in the 6 counties. Emergency contraception (EC) or the 'morning-after' pill, for instance, may or may not be prescribed by doctors' surgeries. Within a surgery, some doctors will prescribe EC for patients who do not normally use their practice while others will not prescribe it at all. Accident and Emergency departments are not required to provide emergency contraception and many do not.

Family planning clinics (FPCs) can be inconvenient in terms of location or opening hours and there is often a long wait to be seen. Outside of FPCs, doctors often act as authority figures who effectively give or withhold permission for sex by giving or withholding contraceptives. Again, young women are particularly vulnerable.

REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

While we recognise the high failure rate of the new reproductive technologies (1 live birth per 10 attempts at IVF) and the invasive and risky nature of the treatments, we support the right of all women to choose this option regardless of age, sexuality, etc. We also call for an informed public debate on the research agenda that values these technologies so highly yet fails, for instance, to explore reasons for the dramatic drops in fertility we have seen in recent years.

SAFETY SHOULD BE OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE

All health risks associated with methods,

products, and procedures should be fully disclosed allowing individuals to make informed choices. Research priority should be given to developing safer methods of fertility control.

WOMEN SHOULD BE FREE FROM ALL FORMS OF COERCION TO BECOME PREGNANT OR NOT.

Coercion can be social, financial, within their relationships or state-sponsored, as in the case of Traveller women, who are offered a (limited) contraceptive service which reflects settled people's values.

PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH

Women have a right to control over their pregnancy and childbirth and to respect and dignity throughout the process. The health services must reconsider their approach to pregnancy and childbirth in order to place pregnant women's needs and wishes first. Women should be fully informed of the range of options at all points in the process of pregnancy, childbirth and post-natal care. For instance, women have the right to decide whether or not to have scans, where to have the birth, and the option to have a female obstetrician. Sinn Fein advocates a policy of encouraging mothers to breastfeed as an urgent public health concern. Services must be provided to cope with post-natal depression.

ABORTION

Abortion is the most controversial of all family planning issues and, as such, is often ignored or glossed over. Due to the reluctance of politicians to approach the issue head-on, the 6 counties are left with a law from 1861 which has been deemed by the Standing Advisory Committee on Human Rights to be so unclear that it constitutes a violation of the standards of international human rights law. The 1937 constitution now gives the foetus equal status with women, but recent cases such as the "C" case involving a young Traveller woman who was pregnant as the result of rape have prompted the government to set up a cabinet sub-committee tasked with re-evaluating abortion law.

According to recent figures, over 7,000 women from Ireland travel to England each year for abortions. Abortion does occur in

the 6 counties in very limited circumstances, for example, in the case of severe foetal abnormality. Although the invisible multitudes of women who travel for abortions are prevented by our culture from discussing their experience, abortion is very much a part of Irish life. It is an indictment of our society that Irish women are choosing abortion in these numbers, yet the issue remains unresolved both North and South. The unspoken assumption that underpins the abortion debate is that Britain will continue to provide a safety valve thereby preventing a return to back-street abortion and the inevitable deaths which would follow.

Ulster Marketing Surveys opinion polls from '92, '93, and '94 show a steady increase in the numbers of people sympathetic to a liberalisation of abortion law. In 1994 over two-thirds of respondents supported abortion on the grounds of a threat to the mental or physical health of the woman, with Catholics only slightly less likely than Protestants to support this position.

SINN FÉIN'S POSITION

Sinn Fein condemns the failure of the Dublin government to enact legislation following the abortion referenda in 1992. Despite the result of the referenda, very little has changed for women in the 26 Counties.

Sinn Fein believes that full information and non-directive pregnancy counselling embodying all choices should be freely available. Sinn Fein is opposed to the attitudes and forces in society which compel women to have abortions and criminalise those who do make this decision. The party accepts the need for abortion where a woman's life and mental health is at risk or in grave danger, and in cases of rape or sexual abuse.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☐ All Irish women should have free and full access to a full range of contraceptive methods.

☐ Accessible information about reproduction should be freely available, including: wider availability

of family planning information and information on sexually transmitted infections and information and education regarding relationships as part of a holistic approach to reproduction and sexuality issues.

☐ All services must be confidential.

☐ Access to medical procedures to control fertility such as sterilisation and vasectomy should be free and full information on the attendant risks and side effects should be made available.

☐ Doctors who are opposed to any procedure or method

should declare their opposition openly on a register.

☐ All services and information should be available regardless of age, marital status, sexuality, disability and ethnic background.

☐ Recognising that abortion in particular is a contentious issue, Sinn Féin resolves to hold an internal debate on women's reproductive choices.

☐ We endorse the International Planned Parenthood Federation Charter on Sexual and Reproductive Rights. See Appendix A.

Women are greatly underrepresented in politics and public life in senior and decision making positions. A recent EOCNI survey found nearly 80% of women and over 70% of men believed political parties in the 6 counties are failing women. Sinn Fein has the best record on gender of all the parties, but clearly we too have some way to go to achieving a truly inclusive political culture.

WOMEN IN POLITICS

Women constitute 14.4% of councillors in the 6 counties, with 3 councils having no female representation (1997). All the MPs and MEPs are men. 86% of representatives at the Forum were men. The percentage of women TD's fell in the the last general election, with lack of support for constituency work identified as a factor. Women make up just under 13% of Assembly members, with Sinn Fein's female representation at 28%.

Research in Belfast shows women councillors have difficulty being taken seriously and their inclusion is conditional on working around the male-defined agenda. They risk being marginalised if they bring up too many 'women's issues', but are often not expected to have a view on anything else. What women see as time-wasting because they value time with their families, men may see as not taking council business seriously enough. The prevailing culture in councils is male-dominated, with the 'old boys network' as healthy as ever in political life generally.

It is likely women involved in politics all over Ireland can identify to some degree with the above. Barriers to getting and staying involved in politics can be summed up as follows:

- lack of role models, time, childcare and confidence
- an unsupportive political culture.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

In contrast, women are very active at community level in formal and informal ways, though again they are less visible in leadership positions. This work tends to be voluntary. All over Ireland, in rural and

urban settings, women are setting up groups, running courses and working on local issues for the benefit of their communities.

Crucially, women seem to experience community groups as supportive and friendly environments. Their local group is accessible, usually child-friendly, and open during school hours. This is an important lesson for political parties.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Childcare provision needs to be developed with the realisation that women prioritise spending time with their children and need to work around children's timetables. For example, early evening meetings are always going to be difficult for mothers, even if childcare money is available.

The appointment of a women's officer in Derry City Council has had positive benefits for raising awareness of gender issues, creating a more supportive environment for women's groups and accelerating the development of good practice with regard to gender.

Lack of confidence in public speaking and assuming leadership roles is an ongoing issue for women. An unsupportive culture within a party, council or the Assembly, for example, contributes to this. The onus is also on men to take responsibility for challenging and transforming the existing political culture.

Many women, especially women living in poverty, do not have the time to commit themselves to membership of a political party. Disproportionate responsibility for domestic and childcare tasks is time consuming. For women to be freed up, ultimately men need to start taking more responsibility at home.

'THE PARTY WON'T GO FORWARD IF IT DOESN'T TAKE WOMEN WITH IT'.

To date, women's organisational and managerial skills have not been used to the full in Sinn Fein. Of course this does not mean women have not been active. However, much of women's contribution has been hidden and undervalued.

In the recent past, women, particularly

partners of prisoners, have taken on huge responsibilities with very little support. Women's support was taken for granted as they struggled to rear families, went without so as to find money for parcels and worried about the effects on their children. When partners were in jail, shows of support from the party dried up. The informal support women gave each other was not enough. Women political prisoners have faced extra trials because of their gender, with constant strip-searches and lack of adequate educational facilities.

POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION/CORRECTING HISTORICAL IMBALANCES

Positive discrimination, or what the ANC has called 'correcting historical imbalances' has been Sinn Fein's policy since the 1980s. 30% of places on the Ard Chomhairle are reserved for women with co-option powers in place when sufficient numbers are not elected.

A common argument against positive discrimination is that it is 'tokenistic'. This assumes however that men in high positions are there purely on merit, and not at least partly because of their gender advantage. In practical terms, viewing women as 'making up numbers' implies they have no other contribution to make. This is very undermining and would knock anyone's confidence. It may help account for women not seeking re-election.

TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE POLITICAL CULTURE - AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

An inclusive political culture will accommodate different approaches to discussion and decision making, allowing diverse interests to be represented at all

levels. As a party that has experienced years of marginalisation, Sinn Fein is well placed to contribute constructively to developing a more inclusive approach.

The culture of networking that now exists in the women's movement throughout Ireland is an important and welcome development. It has created a space for alliances to be built around issues of common concern. Sinn Fein recognises such groups as experts in their field and supports their right to be central in developing social policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☐ Sinn Fein recognises that if the party is to fully represent women's interests, it must undertake a dual strategy of implementing proactive measures for gender equality within the party, and reaching out to women outside the party for their views. Ways of achieving this might include:

- Establishing formal links with community based groups to get regular feedback about women's concerns
- Gender-proofing party structures and prioritising and resourcing political and equality training for all Sinn Fein members
- Developing a long-term plan with set targets and ongoing monitoring to achieve 50/50 representation of women and men at all levels in Sinn Fein.
- All councils should fund a women's officer and childcare for councillors.

INTRODUCTION

This document is a timely intervention as we move into a new political era in Ireland. In exploring the issues of the need for a gender perspective in politics, women and family law, poverty, education and employment, violence against women, women and health and reproduction, and how to move towards an inclusive political culture, this document clearly indicates there is no room for complacency in the struggle for a new Ireland that values all citizens equally.

THE NEED FOR A GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN SINN FÉIN

Mainstreaming a gender perspective into all areas of political life and social policy making is essential if women are to be included in all their diversity. To this end, women's rights must also be seen as human rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☐ All Sinn Féin policy shall be gender-proofed and a gender perspective be mainstreamed into all areas of party policy and decision making.

☐ Sinn Féin welcomes the Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment (PAFT) guidelines introduced in the 6 counties. These guidelines are intended to ensure that policies and public services treat everyone fairly. They should be given legislative force.

☐ Any Bill of Rights needs to be written in the light of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW is a key international human rights document which incorporates a gender perspective.

WOMEN AND FAMILY LAW

Women in Ireland are still primarily defined in relation to men and not in their own right. Marriage, divorce, mediation and

custody of children are key issues where women are often at a disadvantage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☐ Ordinary criminal law - concerning theft, damage, violence, rape etc. - must apply to marital relationships.

☐ Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution should be reviewed in its entirety. Article 41.2, which reads 'In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home' should be repealed.

☐ The 26 county act protecting women and children's right to live in the family home should remain with the addition that the couple would be joint owners of the family home, whether the woman's name was on the deeds or not.

☐ A woman's contribution to a marriage should entitle her to an equal share of the family income and marital property.

☐ Married women working within the home should have the right to an independent income.

☐ A woman should under law be able to sue her husband if he should fail to make available to her an equitable share of the family income.

☐ Women should be entitled to full and immediate social welfare upon filing for divorce.

☐ Access to free legal aid in all separation and divorce cases

should be based on individual rather than family income.

☐ Sinn Féin supports the introduction of Family Law courts to make the legal procedures involved as simple and as unthreatening as possible.

☐ Mediation programmes should be resourced as a priority.

☐ Resources should be made available to health boards to train personnel to implement the Children Act (1997) and Children Order (1995).

☐ There should be no legal obligation on a mother to give a child her husband's surname, or disclose the identity of the biological father.

WOMEN AND POVERTY

Poverty affects a third of the population in Ireland and women carry much of the burden. Lack of access to an adequate income and services affects women disproportionately. Costs of living, unemployment, social welfare, housing, lone parenthood and community development are key issues here.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☐ All social security benefits, North and South, need to be upgraded to provide a basic minimum standard of living and should be index-linked so as to rise with the cost of living.

☐ The tax system needs to be reformed so as not to penalise those living in poverty. High earners should carry a higher tax burden.

☐ Taxation on basic necessities such as fuel should be abolished.

☐ Disincentives to employment must be removed from both social welfare systems.

☐ Social security staff should be obliged to make actual and potential claimants aware of all benefits they may be entitled to.

☐ The Child Support Agency in the 6 counties should be abolished.

☐ Child benefit should be increased.

☐ Accessible and affordable public transport systems need to be developed and resourced.

☐ More resources need to be allocated to public housing.

☐ In the long-term, both social security systems must be restructured to define women as independent citizens regardless of their relationship to a man. Moreover, the two social security systems in Ireland must be fully integrated so that differentiated and unequal benefits do not exist between North and South.

WOMEN AND EDUCATION

Education can be a force for change and transformation of society or can maintain the current status quo of inequality. Therefore, radical changes in the education system are of critical importance in improving women's lives in particular.

RECOMMENDATIONS

■ Immediate measures:

☐ The immediate abolition in the North of the Transfer Test (11+) and replacement by a fairer grading system.

☐ Increased Government spending on school facilities

and resources, particularly in those areas in the North falling under the TSN (Targeting Social Need) guidelines, alongside proactive measures to reduce current teacher/pupil ratios in all schools and as a matter of urgency.

☐ In line with commitments made in the Agreement, a statutory duty to be placed upon the Department of Education, to encourage and facilitate Irish medium education, in line with current provision for integrated education.

☐ Improved career guidance at all levels of education, from secondary onward, with a view to reversing current trends toward "traditional" subjects by both boys and girls.

☐ Improved and co-ordinated equal opportunity training for educationalists at all levels, particularly during teacher training, to address the on going division of the teaching profession into Primary = female, Secondary/Higher = male. Gender awareness programmes should be standard within teacher training, to equip all teachers to deal with the problem of sex-role stereotyping in the class-room.

☐ Comprehensive and on-going sex education programmes to be delivered in all schools throughout Ireland. Education on issues such as domestic violence and sexual abuse to be provided to all secondary level students.

☐ Greater accessibility of provision by adult education and training providers to accommodate women returners. This entails most urgently the availability of creche facilities at all further and higher education institutions, Government training centres, and out-reach/community centres. It also requires that women's right to return to learning is not determined either

by their marital status or their position as part-time workers.

☐ Cuts to the ACE programme and in student grants should be urgently reconsidered, not only in terms of their long-term repercussions for social and community development, but in view of their implications specifically for women students and unemployed women.

The insights and advances of the women's movement should be brought to bear in community education and development strategies. The Centre for Adult and Community Education estimates that over 80% of extra-mural course participants and almost 100% of local unpaid co-ordinators are women. Yet these women are not visible in established power structures and positions of influence. Therefore it should be ensured that public funds be channelled into programmes such as the Youth Action "Community Leadership" project for young mothers.

■ Long-term measures:

☐ Extensive research to be conducted, at all levels of education and on an all-Ireland basis, to determine the extent of gender inequality, in terms of practice, curriculum content, attitudes and underachievement.

☐ The allocation of sufficient resources for the long-term monitoring and review of all reform policies undertaken. The co-ordination of strategy and dissemination of findings on an all-Ireland basis, to ensure that best practice prevails with regard to overcoming gender inequality in education.

☐ Ultimately, to move beyond a strategy of reform to one of emancipation for women, by means of

the education system. This will entail broadening the definition of "education", to enable young people as well as adult learners to question and re-think the entire social, cultural and economic ethos which upholds unequal power relations between women and men, as well as between classes, cultures and creeds. The purpose of such an innovation would be the re-structuring of society itself, to accommodate the voice and experience of women, rather than "fixing" women's lives to accommodate the system. Only when our young people are taught the freedom and responsibility of re-visioning their own society, will education have truly become a force for movement and change, and especially for women.

WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT

Women are at a marked disadvantage in the labour market, and much of their work is unpaid and undervalued. Equal Opportunity legislation has not worked. Lack of childcare in particular is a huge barrier for women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☐ More research is needed into the multiple factors affecting employment inequalities between women and men in Ireland.

☐ The Equal Pay Act (Northern Ireland) and Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and Order 1976 need to be replaced by simplified effective legislation. Sinn Fein endorses the EOCNI's 1997 paper 'The Sex Discrimination Legislation: Recommendations for Change'.

☐ The Employment Equality Bill (1997) should be amended to include provision for hypothetical pay comparators, thus enabling women who cannot point to a male in a comparable job to use hypothetical comparators to argue for better pay and conditions.

☐ The state should actively promote the breaking down of gender segregation between 'women's' and 'men's' jobs.

☐ A national minimum wage should be introduced.

☐ All working women should be entitled to paid maternity leave. Legislation should be introduced, North and South, enabling parents to avail of up to two years job-protected paid leave between them on the birth of a child. Equalising paternity and maternity leave will result in less discrimination against women in employment practice.

☐ Retirement age should be brought down to 60 years. State pensions should take women's unpaid work over the years into account.

☐ Childcare should be tax free and in families/communities affected by poverty, provided by the state. An all-Ireland strategy should be developed with responsibility in one governmental department to implement quality, standardised state funded childcare in the long term.

☐ An all-Ireland audit of women's unpaid work should be carried out with view to establishing a minimum income for all citizens.

☐ Employment policies must be developed with a long term strategy of creating people and family friendly working structures so everyone can earn a living wage while also having time for family and leisure.

☐ Employment equality, equal pay and sex discrimination legislation should be fully integrated, North and South, providing equal protection for women in Ireland.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence against women is a widespread social problem which threatens the integrity, dignity and human rights of every woman. Men who are violent towards women are not subject to effective sanctions in Irish society; violent behaviour is largely tolerated. Domestic violence and rape are common, hugely underreported crimes. Other instances of violence against women include strip-searching, sexual harassment and pornography.

RECOMMENDATIONS

■ Domestic violence

☐ Woman's Aid North and South should be properly resourced by government and recognised as models of good practice with input into all policy decisions on violence against women.

☐ The number of refuge places should be increased as an immediate priority, particularly in the 26 counties.

☐ Permanent safe housing should be available to women escaping violent relationships.

☐ The Family Homes and Domestic Violence (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 is progressive but concern must be expressed at the proposal to allow third parties to intervene legally. Women's groups should be consulted before decisions are made in this regard.

☐ The Domestic Violence Act (1996) should be amended in light of the recommendations in the Report of the Working Party on the Legal and Judicial Process for Victims of Sexual and other crimes against Women and Children.

☐ Women from ethnic minorities, rural and disabled women are disadvantaged when availing of

services. Resources should be provided to correct this imbalance.

☐ Sinn Fein endorses the Zero Tolerance National Strategy Document (1995) produced by Woman's Aid in Dublin and the Report of the Working Party on the Legal and Judicial Process for Victims of Sexual and other crimes against Women and Children.

☐ The Task Force Report on Domestic Violence in the South should be fully implemented and resourced.

■ Rape

☐ Rape law should be changed to include oral and anal penetration by an object.

☐ Sinn Fein has long called for separate legal representation for victims of rape and sexual assault and calls on the 26 county government to quickly honour its commitment to introduce it.

☐ A woman's sexual history and private life should not be admissible evidence in court.

☐ Consent should be defined legally.

☐ All rape and sexual assault cases should be held in camera.

☐ The rule relating to corroboration in the 26 counties should be abolished.

☐ Training for judges, police and the legal profession is urgently needed.

☐ Rape crisis centres must be properly resourced as a priority.

☐ We welcome the 26 county government's commitment to

establish a register of sexual offenders and introduce effective treatment programmes. These should be implemented as a matter of urgency.

☐ Counselling programmes for sex offenders should be obligatory and monitored properly as to their effectiveness.

■ Other forms of violence against women

☐ Strip-searching should be abolished immediately.

☐ More research is needed into the use of pornography in Ireland. Censorship is not the answer to undermining pornography. An integrated approach to preventing and eliminating male violence against women generally will contribute significantly to undermining it however.

☐ Prostitution should be decriminalised and be viewed as a taxable occupation with workers rights and benefits, including regular health check-ups.

☐ The Gender Guidelines for treatment of Women Asylum Seekers drafted by the London based Refugee Legal Group should be adopted as a basis for good practice.

■ Related issues

☐ Mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse should be introduced immediately.

☐ A Code of Practice for reporting violence against women should be drawn up with women's groups and adhered to by journalists.

WOMEN AND HEALTH

Over the course of their lives, women are more likely than men to avail of health-care. Yet neither health service in Ireland is

women-friendly. The Hepatitis scandal is an extreme illustration of this. A pro-active, preventative approach to women's health-care on an all-Ireland basis is a constructive option open to policy makers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☐ The state needs to provide more financial resources for health services in Ireland, and services more attuned to women's specific needs. Carer's work should be recognised and valued with a proper wage structure in place.

☐ Sinn Fein calls for an independent, non-governmental inquiry to investigate the Hepatitis-C scandal and make recommendations about personal, institutional and governmental accountability.

☐ All Hepatitis C sufferers who contracted it through blood transfusions must have free access to medical facilities and be compensated by the 26 county government, with minimal onus on the victim, or the victim's family in the case that the sufferer is dead, of the legal 'burden of proof'.

☐ Sinn Fein calls on the 26 county government to implement a cervical cancer screening programme similar to the 6 county model.

☐ Breast cancer screening must be free to all women over 30 and easily accessible.

☐ Equality training is necessary for all health care professionals as well as more specialised care and resources for older people's health needs.

☐ Health Board Women's Health Advisory Committees should be set up in the 6 counties to co-ordinate with those in the 26 counties.

☐ A pro-active preventative health care approach would incorporate the following:

- resources for new Well Woman centres and existing and new community based health projects throughout the 32 counties
- the establishment of local, and confidential counselling services
- women-friendly recreation and leisure facilities, outdoor and indoor.

WOMEN AND REPRODUCTION

Control of one's reproduction is crucial for women in determining their choices in life, and the degree of control afforded to women is a good measure of how a society views women's rights. Partition has boosted social conservatism in Ireland, to the detriment of choice and self-determination for women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☐ All Irish women should have free and full access to a full range of contraceptive methods.

☐ Accessible information about reproduction should be freely available, including: wider availability of family planning information and information on sexually transmitted infections and information and education regarding relationships as part of a holistic approach to reproduction and sexuality issues.

☐ All services must be confidential.

☐ Access to medical procedures to control fertility such as sterilisation and vasectomy should be free and full information on the attendant risks and side effects should be made available.

☐ Doctors who are opposed to any procedure or method should declare their opposition openly on a register.

☐ All services and information should be available regardless of age, marital status, sexuality, disability and ethnic background.

☐ The possible extension of the British 1967 Abortion Act should be a matter for the Assembly to deal with.

☐ Recognising that abortion in particular is a contentious issue, Sinn Fein resolves to hold an internal debate on women's reproductive choices.

☐ We endorse the International Planned Parenthood Federation Charter on Sexual and Reproductive Rights. See Appendix A.

TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE POLITICAL CULTURE

Women are hugely underrepresented in political and public life. Sinn Fein has a good track record in positive discrimination, but women's contribution over the years has been undervalued and sometimes gone unacknowledged. Barriers to women getting involved in politics include an exclusive, unsupportive political culture which must be changed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☐ Sinn Fein recognises that if the party is to fully represent women's interests, it must undertake a dual strategy of implementing pro-active measures for gender equality within the party, and reaching out to women outside the party for their views. Ways of achieving this might include:

■ Establishing formal links with community based groups to get regular feedback about women's concerns

■ Gender-proofing party structures

■ Prioritising and resourcing political

**and equality training for all Sinn
Fein members**

- **Developing a long-term plan with
set targets and ongoing monitoring
to achieve 50/50 representation of**

**women and men at all levels in Sinn
Fein.**

- **Women's officers should be appointed
to all local councils, and childcare for
councillors paid for by councils.**

APPENDIX A

International Planned Parenthood Federation CHARTER ON SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS:

- 1. The Right to Life, which means among other things that no woman's life should be put at risk by reason of pregnancy.**
- 2. The Right to Liberty and Security of the Person, which recognises that all persons must be free to enjoy and control their sexual and reproductive lives and that no person should be subject to forced pregnancy, sterilisation or abortion.**
- 3. The Right to Equality and to be Free from all Forms of Discrimination including in one's sexual and reproductive life.**
- 4. The Right to Privacy meaning that all sexual and reproductive health care services should be confidential, and all women have the right to autonomous reproductive choices.**
- 5. The Right to Freedom of Thought which includes freedom from the restrictive interpretation of religious texts, beliefs, philosophies and customs as tools to curtail freedom of thought on sexual and reproductive health care and other issues.**
- 6. The Right to Information and Education, as it relates to sexual and reproductive health and to ensure the health and well-being of persons and families.**
- 7. The Right to Choose Whether or Not to Marry and to Found and Plan a Family.**
- 8. The Right to Decide Whether or When to Have Children.**
- 9. The Right to Health Care and Health Protection which includes the rights of health care clients to: information, access, choice, safety, privacy, confidentiality, dignity, comfort, continuity, and opinion..**
- 10. The Right to the Benefit of Scientific Progress which includes the recognition that all clients of sexual and reproductive health services have the right of access to new reproductive technologies which are safe and acceptable.**
- 11. The Right to Freedom of Assembly and Political Participation meaning, among other things, that all persons have the right to seek to influence governments to place a priority on sexual and reproductive health and rights.**
- 12. The Right to be Free from Torture and Ill-Treatment, including the rights of children to be protected from sexual exploitation and abuse, and the right of all people to protection from rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse and sexual harassment.**