



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR THE OFFICE OF THE
FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY
FIRST MINISTER**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Cross-Departmental Gender Equality
Action Plans**

23 March 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Tom Elliott (Chairperson)
Dr Stephen Farry (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr William Humphrey
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Danny Kinahan

Witness:

Mrs Eileen Sung

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Elliott):

We will now hear about cross-departmental gender equality action plans.

Mrs Eileen Sung (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

Following a series of hearing in 2008 and 2009, the Committee asked a number of questions and made a number of recommendations in correspondence. I am delighted to report that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has progressed work across Departments with the gender advisory panel with the aim of developing the next gender equality action plans to cover the period 2011-15, which will cover the Budget and Programme for Government period.

I will outline briefly how we have done that. OFMDFM convened two workshops jointly with departmental equality leads and the gender advisory panel in the summer and late autumn of 2010. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland provided guidance on read-across to departmental equality schemes, which have been completed in most cases. Our hope is that, in so doing, gender equality actions will be fully integrated into departmental equality schemes and that, as we move towards the time when the 10-year gender equality strategy needs to be reviewed, Departments will have a very clear idea of the gaps and the issues that need to be addressed.

OFMDFM is extremely busy at the moment preparing input into the next UK report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). That information is being cleared through individual Ministers. CEDAW is the legally binding United Nations treaty to which the UK is a signatory on measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.

The majority of people here are men, and I am delighted to say that the men's sector has been active in bringing concerns to OFMDFM. The gender advisory panel includes three representatives from the men's sector, and OFMDFM officials have met other groups, including Men's Aid. Ministers have also met men's groups, and we are committed to listening and helping to identify needs and gaps, including those related to men's experience of domestic violence. OFMDFM's particular role is in supporting Departments to respond to identified needs and to monitor and report on barriers to inequality. I will report very briefly on key issues where we have seen continuing progress, and we will then be happy to take questions.

Importantly, £3 million a year over four years has been earmarked to implement the childcare strategy.

Ms M Anderson:

What was that figure?

Mrs Sung:

It was £3 million per annum over four years.

As far as women in public life is concerned, the legislation allows all-women shortlists, and, as I am sure we will see in the forthcoming elections, many political parties are committed to encouraging more women candidates. A new aspiration for the coalition Government across the water is that, by the end of this Parliament, 50% of all new appointees to public boards should be female. How that is being implemented across the regions is perhaps something that the CEDAW Committee will probe.

Ms M Anderson:

I wish it well.

Mrs Sung:

The Cabinet Office is expected to publish an action plan on increasing the number of women who are on public boards. It is also an issue that the current Borroso Commission has highlighted, with Justice Commissioner Reding giving the undertaking that the European Commission will review the position in August 2011.

I think that we have a far better understanding of the gender pay gap and that the Programme for Government indicators are not targets but instead help us to monitor most people's experiences. There continues to be progress in sharing unpaid family and caring responsibilities better, and there is better access to education and training. That has undoubtedly helped to close the gender pay gap.

Where the multi-identities of women are concerned, we in OFMDFM are working on issues relating to migrant women. Particular issues that relate to policing and justice have come to the fore since the Department of Justice (DOJ) came into the frame.

Officials working with other Departments have recently brought a report to Ministers on funding for women's groups and organisations. Ministers have approved that for sharing with the reference group, which comprises members of the gender advisory panel who volunteered for that work. It will be important to ensure that the report is made available to all those who contributed to the review.

I think that the programme of work has moved a number of the issues on, but a lot of them are still with us.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for that, Eileen. I see affordable childcare provision as one of the ways that can help to develop those issues immediately. I know that you gave us a figure, and Martina asked for clarification on it.

However, I would like to know whether, in your experience, that has been developing well. Obviously, in today's society, particularly at higher levels of employment and regardless of whether they are male or female, people need to be much more flexible with their working hours. Sometimes childcare facilities do not provide for that. I am just wondering how well you see that operating at the moment.

Mrs Sung:

There is a lot of work to do, and, again, that work will be across Departments. OFMDFM has a particular role to play in bringing Departments together on issues. However, we are already aware of the considerable efforts that other Departments have made with their childcare provision, which is often focused on those who are trying to get back into employment. I think that a major focus, particularly in these times, is on enabling people to engage in the workplace. In response to your question, therefore, there is still a lot of work to be done. However, the option appraisal that OFMDFM commissioned and that was completed at the end of 2010 goes a long way to address some of the questions about what is value for money and what provides good provision.

Mr Kinahan:

A presentation was given to us, as a party, by the Equality Commission, which concerned me because it showed that in the private sector employment mirrored the male/female breakdown in households quite equally whereas in the public sector 75% of those employed were women. That seems to be almost the opposite of what we are being told here. A lot of matters need to be made more equal, but it threw me when I saw that information. Is there information that is not being put in front of the Committee? My concern is that we are losing the male lead in almost every household, which may be fine for some areas but has a major consequence for Northern Ireland.

Mrs Sung:

I hope that I have understood your question. I acknowledge that there is a big public sector

element, for example, in the whole gender pay gap debate in Northern Ireland. The reason why we have virtually no gender pay gap on some measures is because of the public sector premium and because of the high level of female employment in the public sector.

I will also express a concern in another way. If the private sector in Northern Ireland shows a major wage differential between men and women, it would be inappropriate for the public sector to measure itself against the private sector as being the norm to aspire to. Equally, as the public sector decreases in Northern Ireland, that will impact on the comparator of the economy as a whole. In many ways, the public sector has been a model employer and has provided employment opportunities to men and women alike.

I think that there is work to be done with the private sector to encourage everybody to have an opportunity to fulfil their potential. However, there are issues of choice involved as regards what individuals choose to do within their own family lives. That is a matter for the individual and not one in which government should interfere.

Mr Kinahan:

I realise that there is a big pay gap and that there is a lot we need to do. It completely threw me to see that the public sector is mainly employing women, which means that it is not employing men and yet everything put in front of us shows that women are suffering. It was a case of having a piece of information which was showing the complete opposite of everything we had — yet we are being asked to make pay and responsibilities more even and make things easier. However, what we are doing is shifting men out of employment.

Mrs Sung:

For officials, there is a major concern about the levels of economic inactivity of women in the economy as a whole, which is around 10% higher than elsewhere in the United Kingdom — I hope that I have got that figure right. The Women's Resource Development Agency is undertaking an extremely interesting piece of research on the impact of the economic downturn on women. I think that that would be of interest to the Committee and to Ministers.

Ms Anderson:

Danny, I must say that I have not really disagreed with you much in Committee, but what you have just said is typical Tory thinking. The whole attitude of the Tory Administration is to slash

and burn.

Mr Kinahan:

I am not sure why you are raising this.

Ms Anderson:

I am raising it because of the fact that economic inactivity rates, which you should know about — and you do — are higher for women. Many women in the public sector are cleaners and are doing that kind of work. They are in low-paid, part-time jobs. For you to raise a concern that perhaps we should be trying to equalise the situation demonstrates thinking that is more associated with across the water.

Mr Kinahan:

Thank you.

Ms Anderson:

Moving gender equality action into equality schemes is a good development. I wonder how it will be rolled out. Are Departments committed to look at gender equality action plans and how equality schemes are going to be represented in a way that ensures that groups are satisfied that this is not going to be a tick-box exercise? That was one of the requests of the groups that are concerned about this matter. They need to be satisfied that that will not be the case, and that they will see product and outcome at the other end of the process.

Are you satisfied with how it is being rolled out and that you are seeing evidence of change, both in mindset and culture?

Mrs Sung:

It is a constant struggle, but there are encouraging signs. For example, we know that some Ministers across the political piece take a keen interest in equality and gender issues. We know, for example, that the issue of men's access to services is of particular concern in the regional strategy group for the domestic and sexual violence action plans. We have also seen one Department taking a lead in establishing a target for women's representation on boards. All those issues were discussed in the June workshop that OFMDFM held with Departments. We worked through a number of concerns that had been raised at this Committee, what actions might address those concerns, and what those might look like in action plans. I am seeing evidence of some of

that coming through, but it will not be until we look across the piece and see what the action plans are and how they are structured that we can give a fuller response.

Ms M Anderson:

You just need to keep a watching brief on this Committee and the incoming Committee.

Mrs Sung:

Yes, but we appreciate the interest that this Committee has taken and the number of challenges that it put to the Department.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for that, Eileen.