



1. INTRODUCTION

The Women's Resource Centre is the only funded co-ordinating and support body with a specific remit for working with organisations that work to improve the status of women. We currently have an active membership of over 150 voluntary and community groups, primarily in the Greater London area. They work in a diverse range of areas including advice, caring, counselling, disability, education, employment, health, the law, Lesbian and bisexual issues, parenting and violence against women. Over 40% of our members subsist on annual incomes of less than £50,000 and over one quarter of our members work specifically with Black, minority ethnic and refugee women. As is the case in an international development context, women's voluntary initiatives make valuable contributions to the creation of sustainable, dynamic and stable communities.

The Women's Resource Centre works to improve the capacity of the women's sector through the provision of information, development support to individual groups, training activities and seminars on issues relevant to women. We also endeavour to engage with organisations working on the "front line" with some of the most socially excluded people in our community. In this way, we serve as a conduit for information about policy issues to the sector and represent the views of our membership to decision makers at the local, regional and national level.

This response to the Draft Economic Strategy is a result of ongoing consultation in the women's voluntary and community sector, initiated at a conference in November 1999. It highlights some of the most critical issues and concerns identified by organisations that work for and with women in London.

2. GENERAL COMMENTS

The Women's Resource Centre broadly welcomes the points highlighted in the strategy and particularly, the explicit recognition of women's social, economic and political marginalisation in the capital. We are also pleased that the document seeks to adopt a "joined-up" approach to economic development, focussing on cross-cutting issues with other strategies that together aim to respond to the challenges and opportunities of London's future.

As an organisation sited in the non-profit sector and accountable to a wide range of voluntary organisations, we are concerned that the strategy does not fully address the contribution of the voluntary sector to regeneration and economic development. Many women's organisations are involved in activities that specifically enable women to become more economically active, including childcare, education and training, mentoring and confidence building. This is particularly important for women from Black, minority ethnic and refugee communities who often experience "double" exclusion from mainstream economic opportunities through the impact of institutional racism as well as sexism. It would be beneficial if initiatives spearheaded by or conducted in partnership with the

women's voluntary sector (and the general voluntary sector) could be highlighted and linked into other strategies in the document.

Linked to this point, it is important to recognise that funding to women's voluntary and community groups in the capital has decreased dramatically during the past ten years, seriously curtailing their capacity to deliver vital support and assistance to communities. We recommend that the strategy refer specifically to the benefits of investing in the women's voluntary sector by statutory, charitable trust and corporate funders as a means of encouraging regeneration and sustainable communities as well as promoting women's increased participation in economic activities.

3. SPECIFIC ISSUES WITHIN THE STRATEGY

3.1 Section 3.9: Crime and Community Safety

We welcome the specific inclusion of women as a group affected by the fear of crime. However, there is ample evidence that their fear of crime is merited. One-quarter of women will experience domestic violence at some time in their lives. Women between the ages of 16 and 24 are most at risk of gender related violence. Domestic violence curtails the opportunities for women to engage in education, training and employment at a cost to society as a whole. It would be beneficial if the specific connection between gender-related crime and exclusion from economic activity could be noted in this section.

3.2 Section 4.6: Gender Equality

We are pleased that this section marks the impact of gender inequality on women's contribution to the economy and society. In particular, it is positive that this section documents the existence of systemic sexism within the workplace and how curtails women from achieving their potential despite their experience, qualifications or vision. This section does not mention the impact of sexual harassment and heterosexual harassment in the workplace which has the effect of excluding many women from making a full contribution to economic development. It would be useful to indicate possible strategies within the plan for addressing the problem of sexual discrimination and harassment in employment. This is critical as year on year, women make up an increasing proportion of the workforce in London and they must not be impeded in making valuable contributions to the capital's economic development

3.3 Section 4.7: Black and Ethnic Minority Business

It is crucial to highlight the specific contribution of Black and Minority Ethnic businesses to the overall economy in London. It is recognised that many of these initiatives arise from women within these communities. However, this section does not acknowledge the obstacles faced by refugee and asylum-seeking men and women in applying their valuable skills and experiences through employment.

3.4 Section 6.4: Skills – A Shared Business Agenda.

It is recognised that London requires a skilled and knowledgeable work force in order to achieve success as a world-class city. We are pleased that this section highlights the specific opportunity for women (particularly older women) to develop their abilities and contribute to economic regeneration and development. A number of providers of skills-

based training are included in this section, but it fails to acknowledge the role of voluntary organisations in providing learning opportunities for socially excluded Londoners. There are a number of women-led voluntary organisations that have introduced innovative schemes for encouraging women to build skills and confidence so that they can become more economically active. They succeed in reaching many women, particularly in Black, minority ethnic and refugee communities, who otherwise find “formalised” training and education excluding.

3.4 Section 7.5: Childcare Provision.

We certainly welcome the recognition that inadequate access to affordable childcare and family-friendly employment practice strictly limits the economic potential for many women. Also, welcome is the mention of the childcare sector, largely led by women, as a social economy growth area. We hope that the LDA will adopt a high profile approach in promoting childcare provision within the capital as a fundamental requirement of achieving economic development and growth.

4. SUMMARY

The explicit inclusion of issues impacting on economic opportunities for women within the Economic Development Strategy is to be welcomed. All too often, policies assume that their provisions are inclusive, but in practice may not address the impact of gender bias on the community as a whole.

We believe it is important that the section specifically identifying the challenges of Gender Equality (section 4.6) is retained in the strategy and this and section 7 are extended with further examples to ensure clarity of understanding and intent.

In addition to the specific section, it is crucial that all elements of the strategy include a “gender-impact analysis” to identify the likely outcomes for women and men. Only then can effective plans be forged that will ensure all women in London have the opportunity to fulfil their potential and contribute to the economic development of the capital as a world-class city.

Kim Smith
Director
Women’s Resource Centre
kim@wrc.org.uk

Women’s Resource Centre, 76 Wentworth Street, London E1 7SA
Tel. 020 7377 0088 Fax. 020 7377 5544 Website: www.wrc.org.uk
Registered Charity 1070606 Ltd. Company 2462336