

NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION - BACKGROUND NOTES FOR ECONOMIC AND EMPLOYMENT POLICY

Economic Policy

In the election manifesto the Women's Coalition addressed the issue of economic policy: "it is important that both local and international investment will effectively secure social and economic development, providing long term employment and redressing disadvantage and inequalities. In particular every effort should be made to ensure that women are no longer caught in the poverty trap of low wages and inadequate social security benefits."

The Equal Opportunities Commission published a report on "Women and Economic Policy" in April 1996 (1) which contains much to which the Women's coalition could subscribe to. In summary, the authors suggest that:

- it is not possible to obtain a competitive economy if the pursuit of this objective generates high levels of inequality, unemployment and poverty.
- a more flexible labour market is required, but not one which focuses on cuts on wages and rights. Instead the aim should be to increase training, especially "knowledge based" training and employment levels by promoting innovative policies such as reducing working hours and promoting job sharing.

The Women's Coalition manifesto also argues for inclusion. "Women have long experience of not being asked for their views and not being listened to when they give them." The DED already acknowledges that economic growth which includes all those who have been disadvantaged - including women - is a vital factor in creating social cohesion and solidarity. In this context, we could argue for greater consultation with the community which could have the effect of including women's concerns in the debate on economic and social policy.

Employment Practice

The specific recommendations which the Women's Coalition made in the policy document on 'Employment with particular reference to women' include long-term aspirations for amendments to legislation - minimum legal rights at work for part-time workers; amendments to equal pay legislation; extension of maternity rights; provision for men and women to retire at 60. Another recommendation concerns the provision of accessible and affordable childcare.

1. One of the key areas of concern is equality of opportunity. For while the number of women in the labour market has increased (women now make up over half of all employees in employment) the improvement in their position is less marked. Women account for only one in four managers and administrators.