

Some notes on 'Gender Neutral' Policy Making

An insistence on 'gender neutral' policies has become increasingly common. It is viewed as 'treating everyone the same'. This briefing is intended to provide an explanation for policy making that is about treating people according to their unique needs. What is key is an understanding of what structural inequalities may exist, and what policies will be required in order to ensure an outcome of substantive equality. In terms of gender, this means that policy makers must distinguish between the differing needs of women and men. To do this, however, they must recognise the historic inequalities experienced by women.

In March 2006, at a seminar in Belfast on how to promote and apply CEDAW effectively, Shanthy Dairiam from Malaysia, a member of the United Nations examining committee for CEDAW, stated her conviction that 'Gender equality can be discrimination'. She explained that identical treatment of women and men can be discriminatory and that unequal treatment might be necessary in order to bring about substantive equality. Discrimination can be unintended and indirect through the application of a 'neutral' policy which has the effect of disadvantaging women. She gave an example from South-East Asia whereby the requirement from donors for those taking out loans to provide collateral impacts on women because few women in South-East Asia have property that could be used as collateral.

The pitfalls of 'gender neutrality' can be seen most concretely in terms of how to deal with gender-based violence. An increasing number of men's groups and commentators in Ireland have been arguing that violence in intimate relationships should be treated as gender-neutral. The underlying assumption is that women's violence against men is pervasive and equivalent to men's violence against women. We would argue, on the contrary, that structural inequalities of power between women and men in economic, social and cultural spheres are the broader context in which violence against women needs to be understood. The weight of all the evidence in Ireland and globally is that men are the perpetrators of violence in intimate relations over 90% of the time. Therefore it is essential that organisations and individuals working on violence in intimate relationships address the gender based inequalities of power which underpin violence.

Early versions of the Gender Equality Strategy tended towards this gender neutral approach, as it focused on equal opportunities for both sexes, and confined its scope to 'men and women, those with dependents and those without and the transgendered'. The multiple identities of women – race, age, sexual orientation, disability – were ignored. The approach failed to acknowledge the factors that prevent women from being able to compete on equal terms with men and failed to consider the use of positive action measures to redress inequalities in the workplace and in public life.

The Gender Equality Strategy as it now exists acknowledges the historical disadvantage experienced by women and does advocate some positive action measures. We will be working to ensure that the strategy continues to be pro-active in tackling issues identified by women, while at the same time supporting actions in the Male Action Plan developed in response to the specific needs identified by men.

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