

# Comment on the Regional Economic Strategy from Fair Play South West

## 1. Introduction

This submission is made by Fair Play South West. Fair Play South West is the South West Regional women's organisation; it is also currently operating as the gender network for Equality South West. Fair Play South West is chaired by Jackie Longworth, who is also chair of the Regional Assembly.

This submission is the outcome of a consultation event held at Lyngford House, Taunton on 2 August 2005. The event was attended by twenty-four women from across the Region who hold positions of influence in the public, private, voluntary sectors and trade unions. Our aim was to ensure that the aspects of the Regional Economic Strategy that particularly bear on our lives as women were discussed and amplified.

All the points we make were discussed and agreed as priorities at the event. The themes and issues, which came from our discussions and work on the day, are set out below.

Our response, which is indicative rather than exhaustive, includes a number of general points as well as issues arising from the substance of your main consultation documents including the RES itself, the contextual document, and the evidence base.

We have also commented on issues of presentation and process.

We invite the SWRDA to consider our submission and to include the issues in the redrafted strategy as focussed priorities and actions for the third stage of the review and in the final revised version of the Strategy.

We also intend to use our findings to stimulate debate for the third stage of the consultation. We will offer this submission to the wider Fair Play South West membership and will facilitate further workshops and discussions with other groups of women who would like to be involved.

## 2. Report from the consultation

### 2.1 General issues

#### "Oikonomos"

As a group we agreed that the whole concept of economy should be revised to include the idea of "oikonomos" from which the word economy is derived. In this

concept the needs and contribution of all are taken into account including those who can work, are paid or unpaid, those who need care whether old or young, and those with short or long-term incapacity. There was general sense at the consultation that the work, both paid and unpaid, the skills and the needs of women had not been considered sufficiently in the strategy as a whole or indeed within the specific objectives, activities and priorities.

### **The Audience for the RES**

We questioned whether the RES had been produced for an audience such as inward investors and government departments or whether the intended audience include the general public in the South West. In whichever case, we recommend that the revised version and all future linked documents (such as the evidence base and the contextual document) should be accessible. They should be written in plain English in an accessible font and should be available in a variety of formats and languages. The pictures should be relevant to the text, should not reinforce gender stereotypes and should reflect the communities of the region. The documents should state that the paper is recycled or comes from sustainable sources. To help people to understand the aspirations in the RES we think the first objective should be economic inclusion and that all activities should be linked to clear practical measures for outputs.

### **Evidence**

We agreed that the region needs an evidence base of disaggregated data on women's contribution to the economy of the South West. This can be built from current data sources, such as the census, and used as a basis for developing specific actions and priorities. An example of this kind of evidence base is one recently developed for Sheffield Hallam University for Somerset County Council.

### **Gender mainstreaming**

We agreed that equality should be connected to economy and that there should be a process to ensure that the needs, interests and aspirations of women are included throughout the RES and across all associated strategies, policies, activities and service provision. We know that there are costs associated with this; equally, there is a price to be paid for exclusion, discrimination and an unequal society. We suggest that, in the course of considering the impacts of strategies, policies and services which appear to be gender neutral, the concept of sexism (which is analogous to racism) may be useful. There is also evidence that there are pockets of good practice and innovation in equality work. These should be drawn together and promoted for sharing good practice and to contribute to a culture of gender equality.

## 2.2 Productivity

### **Economic value of women's paid and unpaid work to the economy of the South West**

Women make up 51% of the population and some also belong to disadvantaged groups. We noted that the value placed on the skills and the economic contribution of women in the South West is not well articulated in the strategy. This includes unpaid work in the home, as carers, and as volunteers in voluntary and community organisations and settings as well as in paid work.

We also think that the region's response to the economic impacts of an increasingly ageing and aged population where women predominate in the oldest age groups should be articulated in the strategy. We suspect that women's skills are under used in the region and that this is compounded by age.

It is also almost impossible to conduct an intelligent cost benefit analysis of women's contribution without using the evidence, which has been gathered in UK and internationally over the last 20 years. This shows that women with proven qualifications and expertise are seriously under-used in most sectors of the economy.

### **Equal pay and pensions**

We noted that there was no reference in the RES or in the contextual paper to the gender pay gap and its relationship to the different average wage rates across the South West region. We noted that it is widest where growth is fastest which suggests that women do not benefit from increased prosperity.

We felt that this issue is fundamental to economic and social inclusion and we agreed that there should be regional, sub regional and local targets to close the gap for both part time and full time workers. We suggest that research is undertaken to examine the costs and benefits of closing the pay gap particularly in the care, tourism and agriculture sectors.

The gender pay gap has a knock-on effect on pensions for women. There is an additional penalty of even poorer pension provision for part-time workers who are mostly women. The economic and social impact of these income inequalities also needs to be addressed.

### **Work-life balance**

Work –life balance is particularly important for women who are often unable to meet the demands of longer hours because of their caring responsibilities. It is also important for men who are encouraged to share caring responsibilities. Evidence from France suggests that, although people work fewer hours, their productivity is higher.

We suggest that the RES includes the concept of work-life balance and the associated costs and benefits.

We suggest that that the productivity of workers in different sectors is analysed and that this should include the sectors where women make up the majority of the workforce, including the voluntary and community sector.

### **Skills and training**

We agreed that occupational segregation and the subsequent effects of gender stereotyping in vocational training and careers advice should be addressed in the RES. One of the routes for engaging women in lifelong learning has been through leisure courses where the funding arrangements are due to change.

### **Business**

We think that equality coaching and mentoring programmes for CEO's and senior managers could provide leadership for gender mainstreaming within organisations.

We suggest the formation of talent banks and networks to foster entrepreneurship and provide mutual support amongst women owner managers of small and medium sized businesses.

These banks could be extended to older people who could provide SMEs with maternity and carer leave cover and add value in terms of business expansion and expertise. This kind of approach to equality and diversity in the work force would complement the Government's objective to encourage older people to remain economically active and valued.

### **ICT**

If ICT is to be used to address peripherality, it should be made available to everyone . Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation indicates that people who live in social housing, who are predominantly women, have little access to ICT.

## **Barriers to work**

The RES suggests that housing, childcare and transport structures are in place. However we agreed that these issues still needed to be addressed because they are barriers to engagement and participation in work.

More women than men are accommodated in social housing and they experience issues of affordability and availability in a shrinking rental sector.

Women are more likely than men to use public transport so they need a system that is accessible and flexible to serve their needs. We suggest that initiatives such as pool cars, community car sharing and transport are promoted as part of the transport infrastructure.

Domestic abuse is experienced by 1 in 3 women at some point in their lives. It is treated as a private issue but the effects of humiliation and violence affect behaviour in the work place.

## **2.3 Sustainability**

The RES seemed to suggest that the South West plays a smaller and smaller part in a bigger world. We think that big is not necessarily best and that growth should be balanced with sustainable development, social capital and considerations about quality of life in the South West. We noted that small businesses run by women and which respond to local needs are also important dimensions of the economy.

We considered that work-life balance for both women and men was also an element of sustainability and that this concept should not be confined to issues of the environment.

There was a concern that there was not sufficient emphasis on the depletion of conventional energy resources and the need for new and renewable sources. The aerospace industry, which is subsidised, was identified as particularly unsustainable in the long term.

## **2.4 Sector development**

We noted that the voluntary and community sector and the statutory sector employ more women than men, and yet the focus of the RES is the business sector. Even here, there is occupational segregation in more than half of the key business sectors.

We suggest that other sectors such as the care sector, but particularly the voluntary sector, where women are the majority should also be recognised in the RES.

The voluntary and community sector in particular contributes to the regional economy in terms of innovation, employment, and service delivery. However, it is a low paid sector which has poor pension provision; services delivered on behalf the statutory sector also contribute to the gender pay and pension gap.

We would like to see the full economic and social value of volunteering factored into the RES.