



***SUBMISSION TO THE N.A.P.S.  
UNDER EDUCATIONAL  
DISADVANTAGE  
2001***

**AONTAS  
22 Earlsfort Terrace,  
Dublin 2  
Telephone: 01-4754121/2  
Fax: 01-4780084  
E-mail: [mail@aontas.com](mailto:mail@aontas.com)**

## **MISSION STATEMENT OF AONTAS**

AONTAS is the Irish National Association of Adult Education, a voluntary membership organisation. It exists to promote the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education which is accessible to and inclusive of all.

## **CORE VALUES**

In seeking to carry out this mission AONTAS is guided by five key values:

- The members of AONTAS share a passion for lifelong learning and a commitment to the belief that learning throughout life provides a means by which people can grow and develop and make an active contribution to the development and transformation of their own community and the wider society in which they live.
- AONTAS recognises the key political role adult and continuing education plays in combating poverty, inequality and social exclusion as well as promoting democracy, creativity and economic development.
- AONTAS is committed to the development of a system of Adult Education which is accessible to and inclusive of all citizens throughout life particularly those who experience educational, social and /or economic disadvantage
- AONTAS recognises the importance of building partnerships at local and national level which will ensure the active involvement and empowerment of adult learners
- AONTAS is committed, through a process of action and reflection to its growth as a learning organisation, as a model of good practice and a leading centre of expertise in the field of adult learning.

## **STRATEGIC ORGANISATIONAL OBJECTIVES**

- To ~ Promote the importance and value of adult learning as a key part of Lifelong Learning
- To ~ Participate in the development of adult education policy by working towards the implementation of the proposals and recommendations of national policy initiatives including the National Development Plan, the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, White Paper, Learning for life, White Paper, Supporting Voluntary Activity and other initiatives as appropriate
- To ~ Support and represent the membership of AONTAS to articulate the needs of adult learners and providers at local and national level

- To ~ Identify and strategically respond to changing and emerging needs within adult education by promoting piloting and lobbying for the mainstreaming of models of good practice
- To ~ Build positive working relationships and partnerships with relevant organisations nationally and internationally
- To ~ Build the reputation and status of AONTAS as a leading player in the field of research in adult education
- To ~ Develop AONTAS as a learning organisation committed to embodying the principles underlying its core values

## **EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE**

Education needs to be a key element in any anti-poverty programme. It can perpetuate poverty or it can be a key mechanism for preventing and providing routes out of poverty. The links between poverty and educational disadvantage are well documented. In the national anti-poverty strategy, Sharing in Progress, it was stated that education can play a key role in the promotion of equality of opportunity. It was acknowledged that the lack of educational qualifications is closely associated with social background and that it is the children of the poor who constitute those who benefit least from the education system. While there has been an improvement in the retention rates of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, nonetheless the proportion of students from these categories that do not complete second level education are still unacceptably high.

The OECD International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) 1997 found that 25% of the Irish adult population scored at the lowest level in the document scale with a further 32% at Level 2. The survey identified close links between low scores and low educational attainment with a consequent association with low income. Older age groups had substantially lower levels of literacy.

While the expansion of post compulsory education in recent years has seen a dramatic increase in completion rates for second level education, only 31% of adults between the ages of 55 and 64 have completed second level.

The Green Paper on Adult Education stated that priority access should be given to those in the 15 to 54 age group whose highest level of attainment is the Junior Cert or equivalent. It quoted an unemployment figure of 40400 within this group.

The previous educational disadvantage target of N.A.P.S was to address the problem of early school leaving. This left gaps in terms of adult literacy and adult education. New targets for life-long learning, second-chance education and community-based education and training need to be included in the revised N.A.P.S.

Increasingly it is being recognised that education and training play an indispensable role in addressing and overcoming poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion. Hundreds of community-based groups around Ireland are involved in providing services which encourage and support disadvantaged adults to participate in adult education thereby widening their ability to tackle poverty. These opportunities also enhance adults' capacity to participate in their communities and to improve the quality of their lives. These community-based groups act as an access point for thousands of disadvantaged adults who would otherwise be excluded from second chance education. AONTAS now counts among its membership one hundred and seventy-six of these community-based groups and organisations. They include locally based women's groups, men's groups, lone parent groups, literacy groups, unemployment centres, resources centres, traveller groups and adult education centres all around Ireland.

AONTAS is currently providing support and capacity building training to nineteen women's networks with an information service to a further fifty-one locally-based women's groups. Funding for this work has been made available from the

Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs and the Department of Education & Science.

## **WOMEN AND EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE**

Educational disadvantage is a concept which involves a complexity of factors which are rooted in the social and economic structure of Irish Society today. This results in a mixture of statutory and psychological barriers for many Irish women and is further reinforced by the socially prescribed roles of wife and mother. These barriers include:

- Lack of recognition of unpaid work in the home.
- Lack of access to mainstream education and training programmes.
- Lack of supports including childcare and transport.
- Lack of flexibility on content, duration, location and accreditation of programmes..
- Low aspirations and expectations.
- Low self-confidence.
- Very negative attitude to schooling based on past experiences.
- Women's skills and knowledge gained through practical experience or non-formal education are given no formal status or value. As a result entry to progression routes are extremely difficult for women.

In Ireland 98% of those engaged in home duties are women. There are approximately 597,000 women working full time in an unpaid capacity in the home (HEA, 1999). In 1999 figures from the CSO showed that 42800 women whose highest level of educational attainment was primary education were engaged in home duties while the highest level of attainment of a further 26100 was Junior Certificate. Women working in the home have least access to educational and training opportunities for both eligibility and/or caring role reasons. This fact is particularly important in the light of research, which shows that the educational level of the mother is a key influence on retention rates for children in school.

For many of these women, locally-based women's groups have acted as a first point of contact, enabling women to develop confidence and skills, gain qualifications and explore the possibility of further education and training. AONTAS research conducted by WERRC/UCD, "*At the Forefront*" states that today there are over 1000 of these women's groups in existence, providing community-based education and development, with between 30,000 – 100,000 women participating.

Recent years have seen the development of women's networks on a local and regional level. These networks support and resource the women's groups through information, advice, training and sharing experiences. These networks have become key players in linking grassroots activity to regional and national policy and decision making. They hold the potential to form both an infrastructure of support for locally based groups as well as a means whereby experience at local level can be translated into a women's voice and contribution to policy making. "*At the Forefront*" has recognised the contribution of these community-based women's groups and networks in combating poverty and disadvantage through the provision of community education. The report calls for;

- Recognition of the work and the acknowledgement of the barriers that exist.

- Resources into this sector and the need for;
  - interdepartmental core-funding and programme funding
  - additional funding for childcare, transport and monitoring supports
- Representation of women at all levels of decision making and for training in the skills needed to do this work, along with the enforcement of the gender balance.
- A comprehensive system for accreditation of women's community-based education to be established between the National Qualifications Authority and the National Adult Learning Council based on:
  - Recognition of prior learning
  - Structured system for accumulation of recognised credits
  - Definite progression routes within the formal educational systems at both second and third levels
- Further research on the long-term impact on women's economic and social position of their participation in community-based education.

Adult community-based programmes in particular those put into practice by women's groups and networks play a major role in helping women to examine the circumstances which contribute to their poverty and disadvantage and enable these women to develop strategies to combat this and empower women to participate in discussions on the issues that affect their own lives and those of their families and communities.

N.A.P.S. recognises the importance of adult education and second-chance education especially that of the important role of the Mother's education in relation to the educational achievement of their children.

The absence of a gender focus is becoming increasingly apparent in education policies and actions. For the most part definitions and policy statements treat educational disadvantage as a phenomenon which affects men and women similarly.

. AONTAS acknowledges in its research documents; "*At the Forefront*" and "*Men on the Move*" that men and women need specific targets in relation to disadvantage. Unless, a gender analysis is undertaken, then targets will continue to limit access to those that are most marginalised.

Women who experience disadvantage particularly educational disadvantage need to be a priority group with N.A.P.S. with specific and innovative actions to facilitate their participation and progression in all areas of life.

The emerging men's groups which support the most marginalised men also need to be supported, but not at the expense of women's education. It must be acknowledged that at the most basic educational starting point for adults, provision needs to be gender specific. This has been voiced by both women and men in the researches mentioned above. in order to ensure equality of opportunity.

NAPS needs to be interwoven with all other structural developments aimed at providing access to education. These have been outlined in Government White Papers, reports from working groups, policy documents and national partnership agreements as well as the EU memorandum on lifelong learning.