

SUBMISSION  
TO  
NATIONAL PLAN FOR WOMEN  
(2001-2005)

FROM



The National Association of Adult Education

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## **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**

1. Promote the importance and value of adult learning as a key part of Lifelong Learning
2. 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
3. Support and represent the membership of AONTAS to articulate the needs of adult learners and providers at local and national level

4. 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
5. Build positive working relationships and partnerships with relevant organisations nationally and internationally
6. Build the reputation and status of AONTAS as a leading player in the field of research in adult education
7. Develop AONTAS as a learning organisation committed to embodying the principles underlying its core values

## **Introduction**

**AONTAS** has worked with women's groups and networks since the early nineties. Firstly through two N.O.W. projects that increased women's capacity in organisational management and work at a policy level and enabled women coming through community education to access third level education. AONTAS has conducted various pieces of research into the sector that include-*From the Personal to the Political 1991, Can you credit, a study of the accreditation needs of community groups 1995, and At the Forefront, the role of women's community education in combating poverty and disadvantage in the Republic of Ireland 2001*. More recently AONTAS has supported these groups through a W.E.I. funded project that has been mainstreamed into a support programme called- Taking a S.T.A.N.C.E.

Taking a S.T.A.N.C.E – Strategies to Advance Women's Collective Empowerment – is a three-year programme funded by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs and the Department of Education and Science from 2001 – 2003.

The aims of S.T.A.N.C.E. are

- To develop Women's Networks as regionally based infrastructures of support in addressing women's social exclusion
- To facilitate the development of a partnership approach to linking Women's Networks and key agencies at national level with a view to influencing policy

S.T.A.N.C.E works with women's education networks across the country, all of who are involved in building the capacity of local women's groups to address women's social exclusion. Originally the project was developed to work with 18 women's networks, however over the course of 2001 the number of networks that became involved increased to 23.

S.T.A.N.C.E. works with women's networks at a regional level through the provision of training and information workshops. Women involved in the management of their network and staff are encouraged to participate. These workshops enable the networks to develop their capacity, share ideas and models of good practice, keep informed of developments and enhance and develop specific skills. They also provide an opportunity to strengthen links with each other and work collectively to influence policy. Throughout the project women have had an opportunity to collectively identify issues affecting them, explored their impact, identified specific barriers and looked at ways of addressing these issues

## Context

Educational disadvantage is a term, which is used and understood in a variety of ways. It is a concept, which involves a complexity of factors, which are rooted in the social and economic structure of modern Irish society, which in turn, affect the life chances of a significant number of individuals. The work of AONTAS is based on a philosophy of life long learning which is accessible to all and in particular to those who are economically, educationally, socially or otherwise disadvantaged. Because of its track record of working closely with women, AONTAS knows that women experience particular barriers to participation in educational and training opportunities.

In the International Literacy Survey “Education 2000”, it was stated that *“over one fifth of the respondents were unable to participate in adult education either because of family responsibilities or because the course time was inconvenient. As far as access was concerned over one sixth of those unable to attend courses indicated that the course was not offered, and one fifth of the correspondents found the course too expensive....”* four times as many women as men were unable to take courses because of family responsibilities” (Ch.8).

In Ireland, 98.5% of those engaged in home duties are women. There are approximately 600,000 women working full time in an unpaid capacity in the home. (CSO) These women are totally dependent for their income on either partners or on the State. They do not have equal access to paid work or to mainstream education and training. As well as financial barriers, women experience many other barriers to access to educational opportunities such as lack of childcare facilities, location and timing of courses and unsuitability of programmes in meeting women’s needs

Women who have been working full time in the home are excluded from mainstream provision for a number of reasons.

- The majority are economically dependent on their partners or on social welfare, thus they cannot afford mainstream education/training.
- Most are not on the live register, therefore their access to most statutory education and training programmes is limited.
- Mainstream courses generally operate at times, which do not suit women with children.
- Most mainstream courses do not have childcare facilities thus making it impossible for women to attend. The locally based education groups through providing safe and accessible childcare attracted many women who could not otherwise participate in education.
- The content, structure and methodology of mainstream courses are often planned without consultation with women and therefore have little relevance, effectiveness and suitability for them.

- The lack of flexible accreditation and courses structures discourage women's entry into further education and training.
- Women's skills and knowledge gained through practical experience or non-formal education and training are given no formal status or value. As a result entry to progression routes is extremely difficult for women.

The local women's groups which mushroomed during the late eighties and early nineties were a creative response by women themselves to the impact of social and economic change on their communities and to their own experience of marginalisation and exclusion from mainstream adult education and training provision

These local women's education groups acted as a first point of contact for women in the home, who wish to widen their horizons, develop confidence and skills, gain qualifications and explore the possibility of returning to the workforce.

The circumstances of women's lives were recognised by the provision of free courses organised around school hours and backed up by locally based childcare facilities. Women's culture was respected and new methodologies of teaching and learning developed. These methods emphasised participation, co-operation and creativity. They acknowledged the importance of the physical, emotional and spiritual as well as the intellectual needs of learners.

An AONTAS study of 92 of these groups as far back as 1990, (Liberating Learning, Inglis, T., Bailey K., Murray, C., AONTAS, 1992) documented the range of courses on offer through these groups. These include basic education, literacy and numeracy, hobby, craft and skill based courses, self-development and second chance education courses. Through our ongoing contact with our members AONTAS knows that things have changed remarkably since 1990 and that now many of these groups, as well as maintaining courses such as those listed above, are now delivering university level courses and vocational training courses which are facilitating many women who wish to move into formal education and into paid employment. AONTAS research-*At the Forefront, the role of women's community education in combating poverty and disadvantage in the Republic of Ireland* highlights the impact these groups have on women's lives at a personal and community level. It estimates that between 30,000-100,000 women participate in women's community education groups in Ireland.

In more recent years, local groups have come together to form networks in an effort to strengthen their effectiveness, to address the gaps in provision and to push collectively for policy change on issues which affect locally based voluntary women's education groups. These include issues such as premises, funding, training and support, accreditation, representation and access to progression routes and mainstream programmes.

Since their emergence the Women's Education Networks have developed a dual role in relation to their locally based women's groups members. Firstly, the networks are all involved in support and development work with their members. This includes

information dissemination, newssheet production, organisation of networking days, joint training days and seminars and advising the groups in their day-to-day work. Secondly, the networks (to different degrees of success) have attempted to take on a representative and lobbying role in relation to shaping policies that impact on their members and articulating the voice of women, in particular disadvantaged women, in a variety of policy making, e.g. partnerships, national consultations such as NAPS etc. The White Paper on Adult Education has made great moves in recognising the contribution of this sector and has named a number of recommendations that would support the sector in the future.

Education is the key to many of life's opportunities. For women, having access to an adequate education allows them choices for their future and has a significant impact on the outcomes for their families. Women's community education through its philosophies, process and delivery includes all 12 critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action. Not only does community education enable women to be more informed, it facilitates discussion on a range of issues such as health, poverty, the economy and it creates opportunities for women to bring about change. Community education has a considerable impact on a personal and collective level. Qualitative outcomes range from confidence and self-esteem to tackling community and social issues. Such outcomes can eventually lead to social change, where the people affected by poverty and disadvantage is part of the solution.

**AONTAS** through our work with women's community education groups and networks and our research pieces are very aware of the issues that affect women. Through this submission, AONTAS now calls on the Government to put in place the following recommendations:

- Implementation of the recommendations in the White Paper on Adult Education with specific emphasis on recognition of the potential of women's community education and funding for community education programmes and associated support costs.
- Implementation of the recommendations in the P2000 Report on Women's Access to Labour Market Opportunities to ensure women's equal access to education and training programmes
- Implementation of the recommendations in the Taskforce for Lifelong Learning with specific focus on overcoming barriers to women's participation in education and training.
- Specific measures to be taken to provide for greater representation of women in decision-making structures affecting community based education. These should involve;
  - Implementation in practice of the government guidelines on gender balance i.e. minimum 40% representation of women and men.
  - Direct representation of women's interests on key local structures.
  - Nominating procedure which would prioritise representation of groups and networks directly involved in women's community based education
  - Gender proofing of all policy decisions and action plans at local, regional and national levels.
- Recognition of women's community education groups and networks as progression routes for women in;
  - Overcoming poverty and disadvantage
  - Returning to basic and further education
  - Returning to employment
- Specific gender sensitive actions to encourage equal partnership between the women's community education groups and statutory providers with a view to mainstreaming of programmes.
- Data on women's economic and social disadvantage be gathered and reviewed regularly in consultation with women's groups.
- Production of an annual statistics booklet on women covering all aspects of their lives.