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ANNEX C

WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING IN NORTHERN IRELANDWomen's Movement

Over the last 30 years a very active women's movement has developed in Northern Ireland. The 'Troubles' brought many women to the forefront of community development to preserve their families, homes and communities. They have linked with academics and more traditional women's organisations through a number of umbrella groups. They have also established successful cross-community relationships, even at the height of the Troubles, and from this has arisen a strong interest in expressing their political opinion.

The ceasefires provided an opportunity for further development. A number of conferences were organised on women's role in the future of Northern Ireland. The Government provided support to two conferences - 'Women Shaping the Future' (November 1995) and 'Reaching Common Ground' (June 1996) - both of which examined the need to increase women's influence in politics. Baroness Denton, aware of this mood, also held public meetings across the Province attended by over 1,000 women all keen to put their views on their future role in a peaceful society to Government.

Women's Coalition

These conferences created a consensus that women in Northern Ireland had more to unite than divide them. This principle of inclusiveness was felt to be key to the foundation of the Women's Coalition, in which a group of women put forward the proposal to be recognised as a political party and seek representation at the Talks in order to attempt to break the male domination of the peace process, to present the view that people can agree to differ and work together for the common good and the sake of the next generation.

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In order to emphasise their commitment to this principle and their ability to make it work the two representatives of the Women's Coalition were deliberately chosen to represent a mix of Protestant and Roman Catholic as well as working class and middle class.

Platform for Action

The Government is working on the implementation of the Platform for Action agreed in Beijing. Baroness Denton will shortly be hosting its annual meeting with NGOs representing a wide variety of women in Northern Ireland to report on Government's progress in implementing the Platform. One of the key areas in the Platform concerns 'Women in Decision-Making' and the work being done by encouraging more women to play a part in decision-making processes. Another commitment given at Beijing was to mainstream women's concerns into all policy areas.

EU Fourth Action Programme

Also in pursuit of the Government's commitment to encourage women to play a greater part in decision-making, the Government is supporting a project part funded by the EU Fourth Action Programme. This project concerns 'Women in Decision-Making' and involves local women working with transnational partners (from Sweden and ROI) to determine effective strategies to achieve gender balance in decision-making at national and regional levels.

Fair Play

Government is also working in partnership with others representing the voluntary, public, private sectors, EOC(NI), Opportunity 2000 (NI) and trades unions in promoting the Fair Play initiative. Fair Play's main aim in Northern Ireland is to help women realise their full potential, in order to contribute to the public life and the economic well-being of Northern Ireland.

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To date, Fair Play has identified and is tackling a number of barriers which prevent women from realising their full potential and having a greater say in decision-making in Northern Ireland. These include lack of confidence and lack of information/networks.

Some key facts on women in Northern Ireland are attached.

Key Facts on Women in Northern Ireland

- 44% of people in employment in Northern Ireland are female. (45% in GB.)
- Women's average hourly earnings are 84% of men's. (80% in GB.)
- 34% of public appointments are held by women. (31% in UK - Source: "Public Bodies 1996".)
- Of the 144 publicly appointed bodies in Northern Ireland, 26 Chair and 15 Deputy Chair posts are held by women. (GB figures are not readily available.)
- There are no women MPs or MEPs.
- 11% of Councillors in Local Government Districts in Northern Ireland are women. (No comparative up-to-date figures available for GB.)
- Out of 26 Local Councils 3 have a Woman Mayor/Chair, 4 have a woman as Deputy Mayor/Chair. (No comparative up-to-date figures available for GB.)
- In February 1996 Aideen McGinley was appointed Chief Executive of Fermanagh District Council. She is the first woman to hold such a post in Northern Ireland.

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