



**Strengthening Women's Voices in Government
GEO Consultation**

**UNITE – the Union
Response**

June 2011

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Introduction

This response is submitted by Unite the union, Britain and Ireland's largest and most industrially diverse trade union with 1.5 million women and men members across the private, public and not for profit sectors. The union's women's membership works in a range of industries including food, manufacturing, financial services, health, print, construction, transport, local government, education, health and community sectors, we have extensive experience of representing women workers in a wide range of occupations who are faced with discrimination on all grounds.

Unite the union Response to the GEO Consultation

Unite is shocked and deeply alarmed that this public consultation comes **after** the abolition of the Women's National Commission.

Unite has worked closely with the Women's National Commission and has strongly valued its activities including on, for example: ending violence against women, positive support for women in public life, women internationally – Beijing Platform for Action, gender and trade and developing the response to CEDAW.

Unite believes that women's voices were strengthened in government through the outstanding work of Women's National Commission which is clearly highlighted in its report "*Engagement with Women across the UK*". The abolition of the Women's National Commission is a major blow to women in this country and internationally. It would be almost impossible for the Coalition government to replace this 40 year old organisation and we call for the immediate reinstatement of the Women's National Commission.

Key Points

1. Unite is appalled at the dismantling of the Women's National Commission. This is an organisation that has since 1969 been the one advisory non-departmental public body established to engage with millions of women across all four nations. It has delivered on its remit to "*make known to Government, by all possible means, the informed opinion of women*". For 40 years, it has informed the political agenda by bringing to Government's attention issues of vital importance to women and girls in their attempts to realise a fair and just society.
2. At a time when women in the UK in particular are facing increased marginalisation as a result of the Coalition Government's cost-cutting measures, abolishing the Women's National Commission, with no public consultation before the event is regressive and harmful.
3. The Women's National Commission has facilitated the involvement of women through its networks and links with various organisations and the government.

This consultation document talks about engaging and listening to women through *“encouraging and facilitating the networking of organisations”* while the government has dismantled the organisation that provided a consensus of views through networking with around 8 million women.

4. Unite does not believe that, as the government claims, the abolition of the Women’s National Commission will increase accountability and efficiency in providing a voice for the nation’s women by transferring its primary functions to the GEO. The Women’s National Commission, an independent and cost effective organisation, provided a unique and irreplaceable expertise and the voice of women across the country by engaging with individual women, women’s organisations, including women in trade unions.
5. It is very clear from this consultation that the government has recognised the need to fill the void left by the abolition of the Women’s National Commission. Rather than trying to find a replacement, the most effective and cost effective way of achieving this is to recognise that the Women’s National Commission should be reinstated so that it can continue its work *“to bring the voices of women to government”*.
6. Unite is extremely concerned that the Women’s National Commission’s replacement is mainly an online network. Although this is one way of communicating, it could not be the only way as it will ultimately exclude many women who have no access to IT systems eg. those on lower incomes, with language barriers or with particular disabilities. Additionally, some issues will only effectively be developed through direct involvement.
7. Unite believes that the government’s ‘A New Approach’ in engaging women by updating ‘women partner organisations’, developing a website and new outreach opportunities is an ineffectual response. These methods clearly reveal both inadequate structures and programmes to inform and educate Ministers.
8. The government’s intention of establishing *“direct engagement between ministers, women and organisations that represent women”* fails to recognise that the task of developing those links requires expertise and resources already established in the Women’s National Commission and that they need to be continually developed for example, many women’s organisations and Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAEM) groups have faced massive cuts and some have had to close down. It would be deeply damaging if the government only dealt with a handful of bigger organisations that are not representative of all women. The Women’s National Commission fulfilled this role through many of its networks including women in trade unions and existing groups that provide the expertise needed, ensuring they are sufficiently funded such as many women’s domestic and sexual violence services, Poppy project and UK Resource Centre for Women.
9. We are concerned that the continuous role of Women’s National Commission is replaced by *“time –limited, expert panels”* or *“one-off policy forums”*. This shows the government’s lack of understanding of engagement and taking

action to achieve its own goals stated in 2.1. It has been the Women's National Commission ongoing communication at local, national and international levels, including the four nations that achieved the involvement and engagement of a cross section of women. Women's National Commission's face-to-face contact, focus groups, trained facilitators as well as use of IT systems have managed to convey the views of women, particularly those marginalised in society. This was most evident in the Women's National Commission's work with women who have or face violence.

The Women's National Commission provided excellent knowledge and know how through its 'expert groups' such as the Budget Group, the Gender Expert, Women @ the Millennium, International, Violence against Women, Health Tool Kit and Women & Sport. All these groups, none of which are one-off or time-limited, were the result of many years of networking, involvement and outreach with women's groups, individual women, trade unions and the government. This helped women to engage with the government, to affect legislation, to enter public life and to more involvement at international level.

10. Unite is alarmed that the expertise of the Women's National Commission in providing information and data will be replaced by the government's proposal of "*Commissioning businesses to gather the views of women*". This raises a wide range of deeply concerning issues in relation to confidentiality, access, diversity and public accountability. The government should not overlook and undermine women's organisations of all sizes including the three million women in trade unions.
11. Unite urges Ministers to restore the Women's National Commission as a key independent, representative and impartial link between the UK Government and non-governmental organisations involved with the issues and needs of women in the UK and internationally. We believe dissolving the Women's National Commission is a short-sighted move by the government which is not cost effective, which takes away the decision making power of smaller organisations and marginalises women, consequently making the government less able to make representative proposals. This is particularly evident in the absence of public consultation before the abolition. The Women's National Commission was abolished with no presentation of how a centralised approach will ensure continuity of service, incorporating the voices of both individual women and organisations at local, regional, national and international levels making this government move regressive and harmful.

The Women's National Commission's work in areas around violence against women, the gender and new equality duty, women's international engagement, migrant and asylum issues, women's representation in public life, BAEM women, widowhood and women in the informal economy will be a major, deep and irreplaceable loss to decision-making in this country and we strongly urge the government to think again.