

national assembly of women

social exclusion

introduction

“Social exclusion” is defined by the government as “what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown”. (Cabinet Office, Social Exclusion Unit)

The National Assembly of Women believes that there is a need to reverse the trend of negativity and address the issues of basic rights that will help deliver positive programme for social inclusion. We believe it is necessary to get away from means testing, which keeps people just above a minimum income level, and from area targeting which stereotypes communities, estates and even whole towns or cities and to look instead at entitlements as a way of involving people in their communities.

education and skills

Education and skills must be seen as a lifelong process within which all learners have an equal opportunity for development regardless of background or wealth. This can only happen in a fully comprehensive system, which involves all young people aged four to 16. Students who choose to leave school at 16 should have access to at least another six years of formal education during their life, an entitlement that could be taken up at any time. All college/university tuition should be free to students and a grant system should be established that enables all students to study without having to earn a living at the same time.

employment, incomes and workforce development

Everyone in employment should have entitlement to a development programme that allows them to remain skilled and adaptable in an ever-changing technological world. Wages/salaries should provide for the needs

of the family unit without recourse to means-tested top-ups. Only through a minimum wage, which is well above poverty level, will family units have the financial support needed to ensure that family breakdown rates diminish. Moving away from low pay enables people to move away from poor housing, poor health and fractured social relationships.

Stable work is a significant factor in lifting individuals and households out of poverty. However, studies into social exclusion have also demonstrated that employment on its own does not guarantee social inclusion. Whether or not it does so depends on the quality of the work offered. Good jobs and good training go alongside one another.

health

We need an adequately funded, publicly run and publicly accountable health service. This service must be free at the point of delivery. Only in this way can the spectre of bad health caused by lack of the means to purchase health care be banished. Bad health can be caused by bad housing or erratic lifestyles – an escape from poverty and hopelessness is essential to ensure progress towards universal better health.

retirement

Everyone needs to look forward to a retirement that does not leave her or him in means-tested poverty. We want a return to state pensions that are linked to average earnings (see also our *Pensions Briefing*).

housing and crime

There must always be a reserve of good quality affordable social housing for rent that enables families and individuals to live in a sound and supportive community structure. High crime rates and the resulting fear of crime are generally the result of poverty and hopelessness. Action on

opportunity

crime, including racist crime, requires action on poverty, community safety and community development.

transport

We want to see a structured and comprehensive public transport system that is publicly owned – the only way to ensure that everyone has access to cheap and efficient integrated travel. Communities without public transport become excluded communities. This is true in both urban and rural contexts. Good transport enables people to be more mobile when looking for work, gets people to and from work when they have jobs and enhances access to the range of facilities necessary for communities to be fully involved in everyday life, including local and national democracy.

the arts and culture

As well as provision of the basics

of life, we want to see incomes, which enable people of all ages to gain access to theatre, cinema, museums, galleries and other forms of entertainment and cultural activity. Everyone needs to be able to develop interests beyond the world of work and home.

inclusion for disabled people

Our social infrastructure must be re-designed so that people with disabilities and learning disabilities are fully included in work, social and cultural life.

summary

A true policy of social inclusion would understand the linkages between key issues, as the government has done, but would move beyond targeting and specialisation to a full recognition that children, young people, adults and elders have a right to live in a fully inclusive, safe and empowering society.

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