

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN OF GREAT BRITAIN

Administrative Office:
72 Victoria Road
Darlington
Co Durham. DL1 5JG
Tel: 01325 367375



Registered Office:
36 Danbury Street
Islington
London. N1 8JU
Tel: 020 7354 2395

Registered Charity No. 1001015
www.ncwgb.org
Email: info@ncwgb.org

Do we need a UK Bill of Rights?

Consultation - November 2011

Response from the National Council of Women of GB

The National Council of Women of Great Britain (NCW) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Commission on a Bill of Rights, on the Discussion Paper headed "Do we need a Bill of Rights" issued 1 August 2011.

A. ABOUT NCW

NCW, founded in 1895, works with over 40 nationally affiliated organisations on a wide agenda covering every aspect of women's lives in the UK, and also works internationally for improvements in the lives of women and girls, and of society in general. **NCW** has worked consistently for many years to promote the full participation of women in the workplace and in decision-making processes at all levels

Our work currently covers women from all sectors of society, and we recognise the need for full equality and representation of women in all their diversity.

Internationally, NCW works within the framework of the International Council of Women (ICW), and the European Centre of the International Council of Women (ECICW), of which NCWGB has held the Presidency 2007 - 2011. NCW works also with the European Women's Lobby in Brussels, and with the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. **NCW** was granted special consultative status with the UN/ECOSOC in 2000, and sends representatives to the annual Sessions of the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

B. HUMAN RIGHTS - NCW POLICY

Much of NCW's work has traditionally involved human rights issues, e.g. exploitation and discrimination against women and girls, trafficking in women and children, violence against women, and protection of children from abuse. NCW has two recent policy resolutions on the subject of Human Rights and the 1998 Act; these were debated and ratified at NCW Annual Conferences in 1999 and 2008. The texts are shown below:

(i) 1999 - "The National Council of Women urges HMG, in working towards implementation of the Human Rights Act 1998, and in planning new initiatives for the 21st Century, to involve educational institutions, employers and voluntary organisations in seeking to achieve a better understanding of the principles of human rights and the need for racial tolerance and full equality between men and women."

(ii) 2008 – Endorsing the Anniversary of the 1947 Universal Declaration on Human Rights, NCW drew attention to the many abuses of Human Rights still affecting men, women and children. NCW called for further improved education and awareness of human rights principles and

solutions to issues affecting human rights, such as acute poverty, the many problems of child abuse, including internet pornography, trafficking in women and children, harmful traditional practices affecting women and girl, arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, and the forgotten victims of armed conflict living in refugee camps.

C. COMMISSION QUESTIONS for DISCUSSION– NCW COMMENTS

NCW has invited comments from its membership on the 4 questions raised by the Commission.

QUESTION 1. Do we need a Bill of Rights?

A large majority of members answered “**NO**”, considering that there were few obvious benefits to be gained from a Bill of Rights which were not already provided by the existing legislation. However many members offered supplementary comments, summarised below which NCW wishes to support, and which may be relevant to aspects of questions 1, 2 and 3:

- (a) While the existing Human Rights legislation may not be perfect and may need interpretation in specific cases, it is working well on the whole. In view of criticism in some quarters, however, the setting up of the Commission is welcome, as a means of considering our obligations on Human Rights and ways to promote a better understanding of the scope of these obligations and of our liberties. Among recommendations for consideration by the Commission, NCW supports:
 - (i) Britain’s numerous international Treaty obligations in the field of Human Rights should be maintained and observed. It would send the wrong message to the rest of the world, if the UK were seen to be weakening the protection of Human Rights in this country.
 - (ii) The right to privacy should be maintained, with no exceptions, for private grief and intimate health investigations and treatments
 - (iii) Human Rights should include the right to marry and the right not to marry (to ban forced marriages).
 - (iv) Positive discrimination should be permitted, where valid for the proper conduct of particular fields of work
 - (v) The right to protect property should be extended, e.g. so that squatting is treated as theft and owners do not face arrest for defending their property against burglars.
 - (vi) The right to send convicted criminals back to their country of origin should be emphasised in information to immigrants.
- (b) Additional comments by NCW members suggested that emphasis should also be laid on individual responsibilities and obligations when considering human rights.
- (c) Much of NCW’s work is about advocating and protecting human rights and these should be borne in mind when seeking to make changes and improvements in our national life. In this connection NCW wishes to draw the attention of the Commission to the NCW Policy Resolutions of 1999 and 2008 set out in Section B above, calling *inter alia* for solutions to issues affecting human rights, such as acute poverty and child abuse

QUESTION 4 Are there any other views you would like to put forward?

Other comments from members, which NCW would wish to support, are set out below.

- I. It would be intolerable for Britain’s reputation if the extent of Human Rights were to vary among the four component countries within the United Kingdom

2. We are opposed to proposals linked to the possible introduction of Sharia Law in the United Kingdom, and to the enforced wearing of the burqa by women in this country.
3. It is important to remember that Human Rights apply equally across the board to the worthy and to the less-deserving. Criminal law protects us against law-breakers but we do not tolerate torture or cruelty to law-breakers, and without human rights protection there would be no safeguards for any of our citizens.

D, CONCLUSION:

- (i) **NCW does not on present information support the establishment of a Bill of Rights to replace existing legislation.**
- (ii) **NCW welcomes the establishment of the Commission to examine the complaints which are being made in certain sectors about the application of Human Rights legislation.**
- (iii) **NCW supports the recommendations in Section C above for further study by the Commission.**