



Sisters of Mercy Wiri

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Submission Green Paper on Vulnerable Children

Sisters of Mercy Wiri carries out the mission of the Catholic Religious Congregation of Women, Nga Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand in Wiri, a small largely state housing area immediately south of the Manukau City Centre. Sisters of Mercy were originally founded in Dublin in 1831 to work with the poor, especially women and children. The Gospels, Catholic social teaching, and the charism of the Sisters of Mercy inform the ministry and practice of the Sisters of Mercy Wiri.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri are a community resource and work from a social justice and community development focus, participate in processes that could influence those who exercise power and make decisions affecting the lives of others, raise awareness of current issues, encourage neighbourhood and community participation and support local initiatives. Services currently provided include information, advice and referral, advocacy, responding to immediate need, supporting family/whanau and children, home visits and prison visitation.

Mission Statement

**To work with the poor, especially women and children,
to build positive relationships that strengthen families and communities
and to join with others to bring about a more just and compassionate society.**

Every child thrives, belongs, achieves

Sisters of Mercy Wiri applaud and acknowledge the Government's vision for children, namely, that every child thrives, belongs, and achieves. We also commend the Government's efforts to date to test its ideas with the public before making any decisions, including the writing and presentation of this Green Paper on Vulnerable Children.

All children are vulnerable

Potentially, all children are vulnerable. The green Paper uses the words vulnerable and vulnerability throughout the document without once clearly defining what these mean in this context. Child abuse and neglect can happen in any home, in spite of whether or not the family is judged to be 'poor'. Conversely, many low income families bring up their children without neglect or abuse.

Build a more equitable society

We acknowledge that poverty, inadequate housing, abuse of drugs and alcohol, addiction to gambling and mental health issues contribute significantly to the incidence of abuse and neglect suffered by many of our children. At the same time our experiences as Sisters of Mercy working in Wiri is that there is a need for a rigid analysis of the continued deliberate, systemic discrimination against the children of the poor through policies and legislation. If

our children are to “thrive, belong and achieve” then income inadequacy and disparity, as well as abuse and neglect must be addressed.

Catholic social teaching is very clear in this regard and calls upon us all to strive for the common good. This is the good of us all, the good which includes but also reaches beyond our individual needs and desires, the good of all the people, families and groups that make up our society. It is only when our society reflects this ideal that our children will indeed thrive, belong and achieve. People have the right to private property, but also the duty to use their wealth and property for the good of all.

Income inadequacy first became evident after the 1991 Benefit cuts. Susan St John is quoted on the Child Poverty Action Group website as saying “Our high rate of child poverty is not the result of economic necessity, but is due to policy neglect and a flawed ideological emphasis on economic incentives.” Sisters of Mercy Wiri agree, and call upon the Government to urgently address the issue of income inadequacy.

Income disparity is also an issue. In New Zealand in 2012, the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. It is the view of the Sisters of Mercy Wiri that this is a direct result of Government economic policy and has an adverse effect upon many of our children.

It is our contention that much of the ideology and many of the market policies which have been practised by successive Governments since 1984, and which have been geared solely at “growing the economy” have worked against ensuring that the stated vision of the Green Paper becomes a reality. Our children will continue to be vulnerable and will suffer deprivation, hardship and abuse as long as their interests are not paramount.

As a society we are so much stronger if all the members of a group contribute to their full potential rather than being alienated and disaffected. Our country and our communities, our Government and its policies and laws must strike a balance between embracing individualism and encouraging compassion and care for all. It is our analysis that current Government policies err very strongly in the direction of favouring those who have, rather than promoting policies that create communities that benefit us all. This has a detrimental effect on all of our children, but especially those who come from poorer families.

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- **recommend that Government pays the Work Tax Credit to the parents of all children, not only to those parents who are in paid employment**

Change the Paradigm

And so Sisters of Mercy Wiri strongly urge the Government to enable the vision of the Green Paper to become a reality by “changing the paradigm”. Rather than becoming bogged down on debate about who are the vulnerable children or why many of them are poor or what this policy has done, what we need is a clear vision of the New Zealand we want. Sisters of Mercy Wiri want a society where children can grow up happily fulfilling their potential. Children must be treasured, not just in word, but also in fact.

The Christian tradition, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC), and Te Ao Maori all share in valuing children for themselves. Too many children are suffering in New Zealand today, and many of them are Maori. It is an injustice as well as an international embarrassment that New Zealand is willing to allow the suffering of its indigenous children to continue.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi requires the Crown to work in partnership with Maori to respect and respond to the collective and individual interests of Maori wellbeing and development. All Maori children have the right to be raised according to the accepted norms of their culture.

The rights of Pasifika children and those of other ethnicities must also be acknowledged

Therefore Sisters of Mercy Wiri

- **strongly support and advocate for a commitment by the Government to fully implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC)**
- **recommend that any action includes a firm commitment to the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi to ensure that inequalities between Maori tamariki and rangatahi and other New Zealand children are eliminated**
- **recommend that specific attention be paid to Pasifika children and their families**
- **endorses a whole child approach focussing on the big picture, on the child's whole life and circumstances, not just isolated issues or problems. The concentration must be on what children need for healthy development rather than simply reacting to problems.**
- **supports looking across the whole public service at what can be done which is preferable to looking for single sector solutions. This approach promotes a view of children in their own right, while recognising their need for protection and care.**

Parents and Caregivers

The Government must show leadership in valuing first of all parents, and the immensely important task that they have in bringing children to birth and raising them in loving supportive families. The Green Paper acknowledges the importance of parents and caregivers but this importance is not reflected in many examples of policy currently in practice in New Zealand.

For example, recent changes in thinking around welfare are especially detrimental to the interests of children. When the Welfare State was established in New Zealand, it was to provide people and families with sufficient income to enable them to participate fully in society. This has gradually changed, and now the economic dimension of welfare policy favoured by the present Government is designed to serve the interests of the labour market ahead of the interests of children and their families. Parents are seen as part of the labour market or potentially part of the labour market, rather than, primarily, as the carers and nurturers of our children.

The fact that meaningful employment enhances the lives and well being of people is indisputable. It can also allow people to feel included in society and to feel as if they are making a contribution to society and the national good.

However, from the perspective of Sisters of Mercy Wiri there are some serious implications when these concepts are applied too rigorously and in all situations. The ideal that children are cared for and their wellbeing and security are vital to their happiness and development are, in our view, paramount.

However, Sisters of Mercy Wiri acknowledges the right of women and men who are single parents to be employed, and the wonderful contribution that many such parents make to society while raising their children. However, the task of raising children is more important than any other, from every point of view - from that of the children, the parents, the community and the nation.

From the experience of Sisters of Mercy Wiri the effect that the lack of adequate parental supervision and availability has on children has serious repercussions. When single parents are compelled or even just encouraged to work the results can be very detrimental to family wellbeing and the social education of the children.

The workers from this agency often visit the homes of unsupervised and, in some instances, out of control children and youth to find that parents are working, or are sleeping because they work at odd times, or are doing a course to become work ready. They are unable to provide their children with what is needed, such as their time and availability, as well as the establishing of clear routines and boundaries, particularly between the hours of 7.00 am to 9.00 am and 3.30 pm onwards, because they are often tired, or just not there. Some employees also have to travel long distances to get to their places of employment, which adds to their unavailability to their families.

The lack of sufficient adequate and affordable childcare, especially for low income families, is also a real issue.

Allied to the respect that is given to children and their parents, all those who care for, educate and raise our children must also be highly valued.

Early child healthcare workers, and early childhood educators must be among those most highly valued in our society, as must social workers, teachers, caregivers and others engaged in the health and well being of our children. Currently, such workers are among the least valued in our society.

Important groups that provide effective and essential assistance to parents in their task of enabling children to 'thrive, belong and achieve' include community based, early childhood education facilities such as playcentres, kindergartens and kohunga reo, and groups such as Plunket which takes healthcare personnel into homes.

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- **recommends that the task of raising and forming children be valued as the most important task that society has**
- **recommends that Government pay parents who stay at home to raise their children, rather than pay them to pay private childcare agencies to do the job.**
- **recommends that Government takes a lead on giving clear messages that parents and those involved in the care and wellbeing of children be valued in practical ways for the fact that they are responsible for the wellbeing of children**
- **recommends that Plunket and other Well Care providers be enabled to make antenatal visits to families to offer support and to give advice even before the birth of a child**
- **recommends that professionals involved in the wellbeing and care of children have mandatory professional supervision as a safeguard to best practice**

Reduce the availability of alcohol and access to gambling

As already stated alcohol and drug abuse and addictions among parents of children as well as some young people themselves has an extremely detrimental affect on the overall wellbeing of children in our society. In 2010, Sir Geoffrey Palmer and the Law Commission produced a comprehensive report which contained 153 recommendations, proposing a way of reducing significantly the negative impacts of alcohol in New Zealand when implemented in its entirety.

It is difficult to believe that the Government is serious in its stated ideal of improving the well being of our children when the same Government failed to implement all the recommendations in the report in its proposed law changes. The Government has ignored the compelling evidence supplied by the Law Commission and has concentrated on youth drinking only. The Law Commission report shows clearly that the problem can be addressed by a change of culture involving not only youth but all levels of New Zealand society.

As with the harmful effects of alcohol on the children of our society which the workers of this agency see daily, the harmful effect that local gambling outlets is having on families and their children is as real. Again, it is difficult to relate the Government's reluctance to regulate and control gambling as evidenced by its readiness to change gambling policy in exchange for a \$350 million convention centre to a care and concern for the wellbeing of our children.

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- **recommends that Government adopts all the recommendations of the Law Commission on alcohol**
- **recommends that Government legislates to regulate and control gambling especially in localities in which predominantly low socio-economic families reside**

Progressive Universalism

Targetted services as proposed in the Green Paper are focussed on the needs of vulnerable children only. There are times when targetted services are appropriate and most effective, for example, in instances of child abuse or special education interventions. These are occasions when the group of children requiring the intervention is readily identifiable.

At other times a universal approach is necessary. This is already happening in such areas as education, and immunisation. This approach minimises the possibility that some children will miss out. It also reduces the difficulty of stigmatisation.

In instances where groups needing programmes or resources are not readily identifiable Progressive Universalism is a more helpful process to use than targeting. Measures to help the worst off are most effective if they form part of a system in which everybody has a stake, and which therefore commands sustained support from taxpayers. Progressive Universalism unites rather than divides. Social exclusion is tackled when we feel that we are all in this together. The Well Child/Tamariki Ora Framework and literacy support programmes within schools are examples of Progressive Universalism already practised in New Zealand.

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- **support the continuation and extension of the practice of Progressive Universalism to ensure that the services or resources are available to all who need it, and also to ensure that those most in need receive the greatest assistance.**

Evidence-Based Practice

The importance of evidence based practice and research is referred to often in the Green Paper. Such practice is to be affirmed in all policies and practices.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri point out that many of the programmes and policies adopted by the current Government have been adopted with little concern and understanding as to how children may be affected by them.

For example, at the end of 2011 it was announced that Charter Schools would be introduced into New Zealand. This was without any reference to research or an analysis of the effects of such schools on the children involved and those not directly involved. Our understanding is that Charter Schools will bring few advantages, but many disadvantages. How are these schools going to affect our children, those who attend them and their neighbours?

Similarly, the Housing Policy of the current Government has been introduced without sufficient research into the effects of these policies on children, their families, and our communities. Housing Policy that is most beneficial to families ensures suitable, secure and affordable accommodation to all. Policy that reviews housing contracts after three years and terminates the tenancies of families whose situations have improved is often detrimental to families, children and their communities. It is a recipe for the more rapid formation of ghettos in many of the areas where there are large numbers of State Houses. There is no research that indicates the effect that this change in housing law will have on the wellbeing of children, their families or their communities.

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- **recommends that when Government implements new policies these policies must be well researched with measures that relate to children's wellbeing alongside any other measures**
- **recommends that when government implements new policies these are evaluated as being in the best interests of children**
- **recommends that Government undertakes further comprehensive consultation on the White Paper that results from the feedback and responses received from the consultation on the Green Paper**
- **recommends that the proposed men's prison to be built at Wiri be deferred and the funding saved be diverted to programmes to assist children**
- **recommends that there be a cross Government or multi party accord committed to addressing issues relating to the wellbeing of our children**

In conclusion, Sisters of Mercy Wiri acknowledge the Government's vision for children, namely, that every child thrives, belongs and achieves and calls upon the Government to act with integrity. We urge the adoption of our recommendations which are based on lived experience of working with vulnerable families in Wiri for the past 20 years. We encourage the Government to make policy changes that will demonstrate leadership and intent to address this complex issue. We believe that vulnerable children and their families need long term solutions, the results of which will not be evident for 10 to 20 years. This cannot be done on a shoe-string budget or by robbing Peter to pay Paul! Half measures are not good enough.

In the words of Major Campbell Roberts ‘Creating effective policy to protect our children is a task that should consume us with urgency and passion. For solving it is the answer to a just, equitable, healthy and prosperous New Zealand.’ (Paper given at the Welfare and Social Sector Policy and Reform Conference, June 2011).

“A nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members.”

Mahatma Ghandi

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