

Simon Parsons  
Department for Constitutional Affairs  
Legal and Judicial Services Group  
5<sup>th</sup> Floor  
PO Box 38528  
30 Millbank  
London  
SW1P 4XB

6 November 2003

Dear Mr Parsons,

**RE: Constitutional Reform: a Supreme Court for the United Kingdom**

Rights of Women is grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Department of Constitutional Affairs' consultation on this matter, and welcomes the proposal that a Supreme Court be established. Below we set out principles we believe should be included in any design or strategy for the new Court.

We believe that meaningful access to and administration of justice is dependent on having a diverse and representative legal profession, at all levels. Women are underrepresented in the legal profession as a whole, and particularly at the higher levels, including among the senior judiciary. Women from disadvantaged or socially excluded backgrounds are seriously underrepresented within the profession, to the detriment of the justice system.

As a guiding principle, any future strategy on a Supreme Court must be thoroughly equality proofed. This means checking the impact of proposals on people within the six equality strands: gender, ethnic background, disability, sexuality, age and religion. In the context of future appointments to the Supreme Court, we would argue that such matters should be dealt with by the proposed independent Judicial Appointments Commission (see our separate response to the consultation paper *Constitutional Reform: a New Way of Appointing Judges*). Particular attention must therefore be paid to addressing obstacles facing Black women and women from minority ethnic communities, disabled women, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and transgender women, older women and women experiencing social exclusion.

All current and future members of the judiciary should receive compulsory equalities training relating to the strands identified above. There should also be mandatory training on key issues including domestic violence, sexual

violence, homophobic and racial hate crimes, harassment and discrimination. This will be of particular importance for Supreme Court judges.

***Background: Rights of Women***

Rights of Women is an industrial and provident society, which was founded in 1975 to promote the interests of women in relation to the law. We run a free, national confidential telephone legal advice help line for women. We specialise in advising in family law, especially domestic violence and Children Act matters. Rights of Women works to attain justice and equality by informing, educating and empowering women on their legal rights. We are a membership organisation and our activities include producing publications, organising conferences and training courses, and doing policy and research work.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries regarding our response. I look forward to seeing the results of the consultation process.

Yours sincerely,

Ranjit Kaur  
Director