



National Women's
Council of Ireland
Comhairle Náisiúnta
na mBan in Éirinn

National Women's Council of Ireland Pre-Budget Submission 2005

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Women have done the work: it's time to share the gains

The 'Programme for Government' outlines the Government's commitment to build a just and inclusive society. Commitment to reducing women's poverty and promoting women's economic rights and independence have been demonstrated by the Irish Government in signing up to the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention for Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Government has also set clear targets in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) to reduce consistent poverty for women, to below 2 per cent. **Budget 2005 is the opportunity for the Government to fulfil these commitments; the resources are there, what is needed is action.**

The 2004 UN Human Development Report clearly shows that the advancement of women's position in Ireland seriously lags behind women in Europe. While women have contributed significantly to Ireland's economic success, they have not experienced the benefits of that success. The feminisation of poverty continues; as 23 per cent of women are at risk of falling below the poverty line, in comparison to 19 per cent of men and the risk of poverty is increasing for older women and lone parents.

Increasing women's economic independence through social welfare and employment, will not only reduce women's poverty, but will also go towards addressing the risk of child and family poverty in Ireland.

The National Women's Council of Ireland has identified the following priorities to reduce poverty and inequality for women living in Ireland:

- Ensuring Women's Economic Independence
- Health for All
- Working for an Anti-Racist Society
- Building Women's Participation

ENSURING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE – ALLEVIATING WOMEN'S POVERTY

INCOME ADEQUACY SOCIAL WELFARE REFORM

Recommendations

- Increase Child Benefit for the first and second child by €18 and for the third and subsequent child by €20.
- Increase the lowest social welfare rates by €15.20.
- Increase the Qualified Adult rate to 100% of the lowest social welfare rate.
- Increase the One Parent Family payment by a minimum of g12 and increase the earnings disregard to a lower limit of €190, with an upper cut-off of €325.
- Recognise, cost and introduce a Cost of Disability Payment.
- Abolish means testing on disability related supports.

Rationale

Adequacy: The policy target set by the Government in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy is a minimum social welfare rate of €150 by 2007 (to be inflation-adjusted). The Social Welfare increases in Budget 2005 must move forward to meet this target within the agreed timeframe.

Increasing the adult social welfare rates and in particular the One Parent Family Payment is critical so as to reduce the gap between rich and poor in Ireland and to alleviate women's risk of poverty.

Prioritising Child Benefit in Budget 2005 as a means of increasing resources to low income families and alleviating children's poverty is critical for the Government to fulfil the commitments it set in 2001 and in Sustaining Progress.

EMPLOYMENT AND THE GENDER PAY GAP

Recommendations

- Remove all minimum wage earners from the tax net.
- Introduce a part-time unemployment benefit and assistance for parents with children aged 0-12, so that women seeking part-time work would have their part-time unemployment recognised.
- Introduce specific reforms of the social insurance contribution rules to ensure that relatives and spouses of self-employed (including farmers) can be insured as employees.
- Structural reform of the social insurance system in relation to eligibility for credits by way of changing S57 S1 312 1996, to enable a re-entry credit for homemakers re-entering the system.
- Abolish the limitation rule.
- Provide sufficient funding to maintain levels of Community Employment Schemes and allow participants to retain secondary benefits including rent allowance and supplement.

Rationale

Removal of Barriers to Employment: In the Programme for Government 2002, the Government commits itself to 'introduce new supports for those experiencing or likely to experience severe employability barriers'. Women account for 80% of part-time workers and many

choose part-time work to combine care work with paid employment. One-third of unemployed women state that they are seeking part-time employment. The social welfare system does not recognise this reality, so that women have to prove they are looking for full time work in order to receive social welfare payments. Part-time unemployment benefit/assistance for parents with children up to age 12, would assist women and men to combine care work and employment.

Spouses of business owners (mainly women) who are working in the family business including farming are treated as **'relatives assisting'**. Although working, 'relatives assisting' cannot make PRSI contributions, which would entitle them to unemployment benefit and old age contributory pensions.

Many women, care-working full time in their homes, are not recognised as part of the labour force. This means that they can be excluded from a range of employment schemes and training programmes, participation in which is dependent on the live register. Abolishment of the **'two-year'** rule would relieve this situation.

The **limitation rule** limits the amount of benefits received where two adults are eligible for social assistance payments. It assumes that two people can live more cheaply than one, saving up to 15% of costs between them. Research highlights practical difficulties in determining actual economies, the fact that from household to household economies will differ, and questions whether in fact these economies exist.

Employment Supports: The reductions in community employment schemes have particularly affected older women and lone parents by reducing their chances of accessing employment and as a consequence keeping them dependent on the state. Investment in in-work training and support schemes, such as those available through community employment schemes, are necessary to increase these women's choices and opportunities.

CARE WORK

Recommendations

- Abolish the means test for the Carer's Allowance. Increase the level of the benefit and index it according to Gross Average Industrial Earnings.
- Value care of older people and disabled people as paid work by turning carer's benefit and allowance into a 'wage'.

- Each carer should be given a Cost of Care Payment to cover additional costs associated with providing care to a person in their own home.

Rationale

To acknowledge the valuable work that all carers contribute to our economy and to increase the autonomy of carers and those in care within households, the Government needs to abolish the means test for Carer's Allowance. The Carer's Allowance and benefit should be combined so that carers are paid for the work that they do, in the form of a 'wage', so that all carers can build independent PRSI records.

CHILDCARE

Recommendations

- Establish a public pre-school childcare place for all children.
- Provide exchequer finance to continue the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme beyond the National Development Plan.
- Increase the funding to the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme.
- Increase Childcare allowances for education and training programmes operated by the Vocational Educational Committees and FAS, by an additional €1 million for each body.
- Extend maternity benefit from 18 weeks to 26 weeks.
- Introduce 18 weeks paid parental leave benefit for parents of children under the age of five, to be paid at the same rate as maternity benefit.
- Establish paid part-time parental benefit for parents of children up to the age of eleven.
- Introduce a means-tested parental allowance payment available to parents with a child under the age of five.
- Develop a means-tested part-time parental allowance available to parents with a child under the age of eleven.

Rationale

Women carry the main responsibilities attached to care work and are simultaneously required to balance it with paid employment. Take up rates of part-time and full-time employment by women is directly linked to the availability of **affordable, quality childcare and eldercare**. In many cases the cost of childcare does not justify employment. Women with caring responsibilities have restricted choices, which are affected by the structural inequalities that exist in an economic environment where care work is undervalued. Provision of accessible and affordable community childcare is a critical issue for women wishing to return to work and education.

The 2002 Programme for Government detailed the Government's commitment to strengthening the **parental leave scheme** in line with the social partners recommendations to introduce paid parental leave benefit, which is a positive feature to support the family unit. Social assistance reform is necessary to facilitate lone parents' family formation choices as recommended in the NESF report on Lone parents (2001) and the Department of Social and Family Affairs' One-Parent Payment Review. Part-time contingencies in such payments facilitate the balance of care work with employment.

PENSIONS

Recommendations

- Increase the Qualified Adult Allowance for all Old-Age pensions to 100% of the Non-Contributory Old-Age Pension. This payment should be paid directly to the Qualified Adult.
- Change the 1994 homemakers 'Disregards' scheme to Homemakers 'Credits'
- Make these credits retrospective for all women who engaged in unpaid care work at that time from 1973.
- A couple should receive their pension entitlements when one of them reaches pension age regardless of whether it is the qualified adult or insured person who turns 66 first.

Rationale

Women's welfare is primarily linked to the payment rate for qualified adults, due to the fact that women make up 95% of all qualified adults. Combat Poverty Agency 2001 data reveals that women aged 65 years and older have a 50% risk of falling below the 60% poverty line in comparison to 36% of men. To reduce this gap, the Government's commitment to **increasing the qualified adult** rate to 100% of the personal non-contributory adult rate (currently 84% for qualified adults over 66) should be honoured. Allowing women direct access to pensions will go towards moving women out of poverty and increase their economic independence. By changing the homemaker's scheme to **'credits' rather than 'disregards'**, women's contribution to society as carers would be recognised. In applying the 1994 **Homemakers scheme retrospectively** this would allow women carers from 1973 onwards the maximum 20 years credit for time spent caring which could have positive implications for eligibility for pension at age 66.

- End the direct provision policy and integrate asylum seekers into the mainstream social and supplementary welfare system.
- Abolish the Habitual Residence Condition that serves to impact negatively on women seeking accommodation including returned Irish emigrants and non-nationals seeking accommodation in Ireland.
- Address the severe backlog in public and social housing provision, by providing a minimum of 10,000 units of accommodation in 2005 (7,000 minimum local authority and 3,000 minimum housing association).
- Provide adequate and realistic funding for the full implementation of the Department of the Environment's Strategy 'Homelessness – An Integrated Strategy'.

COMMUNITY BASED EDUCATION

Recommendations

- Provide Multi-Annual Funding of Community-Based Women's Education Groups to ensure their ongoing operation and contribution to Education as committed to in the Programme for Government.

Rationale

The Government promised in its Programme for Government to ensure that lifelong learning policies would be responsive to the needs of women. This included the development of appropriate mechanisms for recognising effective community-based progression routes. Multi-annual funding would enable organisations to continue providing education to women, especially in situations of disadvantage.

ACCOMMODATION

Recommendations

- Repeal the current rent allowance ruling, prohibiting those who have not been in private rented accommodation for over 6 months from receiving rent allowance.

Rationale

Access to appropriate, quality and affordable accommodation is one of the most important considerations for women in relation to moving out of poverty and the health and safety of themselves and their children. Current rent allowance rules, the system of direct provision and the failure of the state to provide accommodation to women living in poverty, further exacerbates the social exclusion of significant numbers of women and families.

HEALTH FOR ALL

MEDICAL CARD

Recommendations

- Raise the medical card threshold to include those on minimum wage, those returning to employment including Travellers and disabled people
- Expand the medical card to all children under 18 years.

Rationale

Many low-income individuals and families are unable to access affordable health-care because they are above the income threshold for a medical card. Fear of losing their entitlement to a medical card for families, prevents many women in receipt of social welfare, disability and other allowances from making the transition to employment. Similarly, enabling those on social welfare to retain eligibility for the medical card for the first year in employment and when participating in education and training would support many to make a successful transition from welfare to work.

The absence of free medical treatment for children has serious consequences for many women, the majority of whom put their own health at risk in order to pay for their children's medical costs. The extension of the medical card to all dependent children under 18 would recognise the significant expenses being borne by many families in paying for their children's medical treatment.

FULL NATIONAL ROLLOUT OF BREAST & CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING PROGRAMMES

Recommendations

- Immediate full National roll-out of Breast Check: the National Breast Screening Programme for completion by 2005.
- Provision of additional resources for extension of Breast Clinics and treatment services to enable services to effectively deal with subsequent increase in diagnosis including the development of a free prosthesis service with appropriately trained staff, free and fully accessible to all women following mastectomy.
- Immediate and full National roll-out of the Irish Cervical Screening Programme (ICSP), including the provision of free screening for women with medical cards.

Rationale

Breast Check: The difference in Breast Cancer

Statistics between Northern Ireland, where a Breast Screening Programme has been in place for the past 10 years and the Republic, provides clear evidence that there is an urgent need to complete the full **National roll-out of Breast Check**, the National Screening Programme, according to the original schedule of 2005. The current plan for roll-out by 2008 will result in women dying needlessly. The Irish Cancer society has highlighted evidence to demonstrate the need to extend the age for screening for women up to age 70 and NWCi would urge that the qualifying age be extended to include women from age 40 up to age 70.

Prosthesis Service: Currently the service lacks coherence as the costs to women, including those on medical cards, vary from place to place, in some cases prosthesis is free while otherwise the cost can vary from 50-2000.

Cervical cancer: Screening is proved to reduce deaths caused by **cervical cancer**. In Ireland, the ICSP is currently only available to women living in the Mid-Western Health Board area. Outside this area, women with medical cards frequently have to pay for cervical screening because while the laboratory testing is free, the actual smear test is not included in the GMS special category payments to doctors. This lack of cohesion means that Irish women outside the Mid-Western Health Board area, especially those living in poverty, are at greater risk of developing cervical cancer.

MATERNITY SERVICES AND MIDWIFERY LED SERVICES BREAST FEEDING

Recommendations

- Midwifery-led Maternity Services should be expanded nationally.
- The Government must ensure that employers provide flexibility to enable women who return to work after maternity leave to continue breastfeeding their baby, if they wish.

Rationale

Learning from recent schemes, e.g. the North Eastern Health Board Area model, which piloted community-based, midwifery-led and domino services, demonstrated the safety and effectiveness of such services and women's requirements for such childbirth choices.

The long-term health benefits of Breast-feeding for babies and mothers are well established. However there is a need for breast-feeding women to be supported both at work and in public areas.

HEALTH CARE OF ASYLUM SEEKERS AND MIGRANTS

Recommendations

- Establish culturally appropriate Interpreter Services throughout the health system
- Abolish direct provision, which has been noted to have a negative effect on the health of asylum seekers.

Rationale

The lack of culturally appropriate interpreting services for migrants and asylum seekers, prevents their full access to health services and makes diagnosis and treatment more difficult, due to lack of communication.

Research by the North Eastern Health Board has shown that there has been a decrease in the incidence of Breast Feeding amongst asylum seekers because direct provision includes the distribution of free formula milk.

TRAVELLERS HEALTH

Recommendations

Allocate €4m for the implementation of the National Traveller Health Strategy.

Rationale

National Traveller Health Strategy: The health status of Traveller women remains a cause of major concern, with life expectancy for Traveller women at 12 years younger than settled women and infant mortality rates 3 times higher than those in the settled community. €4 million is required in this budget; including €2 million that should have been allocated in 2004, for the implementation of the strategy.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Recommendations

- Funding for specialist services working on violence against women must be increased from €12 million to €19 million by the end of 2005 and a national funding framework for NGOs working on violence against women must be developed by 2006. Funding for violence against women should be ring-fenced for frontline service responses only.
- The 6 Government departments, which have a role preventing violence against women, should develop ring-fenced budget lines by 2006.
- Provide adequate funding to implement the strategic plan currently being developed by the National Steering Committee on Violence against Women.
- Provide increased funding to the Legal Aid Board in order to decrease current waiting lists.

Rationale

Research has shown that 18% of women experience domestic violence and that 20.4% of adult women have experienced sexual violence. A range of services are required to support women experiencing male violence including support and information services, emergency accommodation, transitional housing and counselling services. Funding for these services remains insecure and must be increased. In order to ensure the long-term development of services a national funding framework must be developed.

WORKING FOR AN ANTI-RACIST SOCIETY

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NAPAR & THE TASK FORCE ON TRAVELLERS

Recommendations

- Allocate €10m for the development of the National Action Plan Against Racism (NAPAR) implementation structures and processes.
- Ring-fence funding and allocate personnel to support the work of the Committee to Monitor the Implementation of the Task Force on the Travelling Community.

Rationale

The finalisation and implementation of the **Irish National Action Plan Against Racism** provides an important opportunity for the Irish Government to meet the many challenges facing Irish society towards building a culturally inclusive, anti-racist Ireland. To this end, it is imperative that this budget commits to the allocation of adequate resources, for the initial development of implementation structures and processes for the NAPAR in 2005.

The Committee to Monitor the Implementation of the Task Force on the Travelling Community has been meeting since 1996 in an effort to address the on-going marginalisation and social exclusion of Travellers. This committee has been poorly resourced and requires additional personnel and funding.

REFUGEE AND ASYLUM SEEKING WOMEN – MINIMISING THE POVERTY TRAP

Recommendations

- Restore child benefit for the children of asylum seekers.
- Repeal the current rent allowance ruling prohibiting those who have not been in private rented accommodation for over 6 months from receiving rent allowance.
- Provide entitlement to asylum seekers and refugees to free fees at third level.

Rationale

The above recommendations are made in light of the range of poverty risks facing refugee and asylum seeking women today. A significant number of these women are raising families on their own; have full caring responsibilities with little access to support, resources, education or employment. We therefore call on the Government to implement concrete measures in this budget to address the serious threats facing these women and their children.

SUPPORTING THE INTEGRATION OF MIGRANT WOMEN

Recommendations

- Allocate a specific budget for the development of an integration strategy for migrants as identified in the National Action Plans for Social Inclusion.
- Allocate €700,000 for the development of supports for organisations representing the interests of migrant workers (particularly targeting migrant women and women who have been trafficked to Ireland for the purposes of sexual exploitation).
- Identify migrant workers (and in particular migrant women) as a specific target group within the Community Development Support Programme.
- Allocate €100,000 for the development of initiatives to prepare migrant workers for migration to Ireland prior to departure.
- Double the number of staff in the Labour Inspectorate in the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment to monitor the implementation of employment rights in the workplace for minority ethnic women, such as working conditions, hours of work, payment of wages etc. in the private sector.

Rationale

The majority of migrant workers in Ireland are employed in lower paid, low skilled jobs with fewer opportunities for family reunification, extension of residence or for changing their

employment. The integration of migrant workers, particularly long term migrant workers has been identified as a policy objective of the European Union under the European Social Agenda and the European Agenda against Social Exclusion and Discrimination. Increasing numbers of migrant women are now being trafficked to the EU for the purposes of sexual exploitation. The Irish Government must live up to its responsibilities to tackle this crime, to provide protection and support to women who find themselves in this situation.

WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

Recommendations

- Allocate €1m for the development of human rights education for women and the establishment of supports for the women's sector, in monitoring relevant UN Treaties and Agreements.

Rationale

'The gap between the existence of rights and their effective enjoyment derives from a lack of commitment by Governments to promoting and protecting those rights and the failure of Governments to inform women and men alike about them'. 'Beijing Platform for Action'

A number of women's organisations in Ireland have assumed the task of building awareness of women's human rights, and of the Irish Government's commitments to upholding and supporting those rights. Funding is being sought to support the work of these poorly resourced organisations and to ensure the presence of women's NGOs within all relevant monitoring processes and procedures.

BUILDING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

FUNDING THE WOMEN'S SECTOR WOMEN IN POLITICAL DECISION MAKING

Recommendations

- The Government should establish a new budget line in the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform (DJELR), to resource the women's community sector. The budget line should be provided with sufficient resources to ensure that each group, in existence for more than 12 months, would be provided with funding of a minimum of €7,000 per year.
- Allocate €500,000 for the development of a national pilot initiative promoting the participation of women from marginalised communities into political life.

Rationale

Funding the women's sector: The women's sector provides a valuable example of how to generate social capital. Women's groups are a vital element of civil society and directly address the experience of inequality: low self-esteem, isolation, economic dependence and powerlessness. To redress these inequalities requires both structural change at an institutional level and empowerment of women, through investment in the infrastructure of the women's sector. A dedicated budget line within the DJELR is more critical at this time given the ending of the Equality for Women Measure.

Women in political decision making: 51% of our population are women, but only 13% of elected T.Ds are women. Ireland compares poorly to other nations in the parliamentary representation of women, ranking 59th out of 120 nations. 10 counties in the Republic of Ireland have no women T.Ds. Women from marginalised communities are particularly distanced from political decision-making and political life. A specific and concerted effort to address the situation is urgently needed and a clear commitment from Government to deal with this democratic deficit is required.

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