



National Women's
Council of Ireland

Comhairle Náisiúnta
na mBan in Éirinn

PRE-BUDGET 2007 SUBMISSION

INTRODUCTION

Budget 2007 will be the final opportunity for this Government to allocate resources towards women's equality. Throughout its term of office the Government has made commitments to ending poverty for women and to reduce discrimination against women. The NWCI is prioritising five areas where resources are required to address the structural inequalities experienced by women in Ireland.

- Economic Independence for Women
- Childcare
- Women's participation in decision making
- Health and Well Being of women
- Violence Against Women

SOCIAL WELFARE

Economic Independence for Women

INCOME ADEQUACY

Recommendations¹:

- Increase Personal Social Welfare rates by €26.00 (€1.33b).
- Increase Child Benefit for the first and second child by €14 per month and by €16 for the third and subsequent child (€190m).
- Increase One Parent Family Payment by €26.00 (€110m).
- Increase all Child Dependent Allowances up to a standard rate of €25 (€110m)
- Increase the Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) payment for people in direct provision from €19.10 to €50.50.

Rationale

Under the National Anti-Poverty Strategy the Government is committed to providing a minimum social welfare rate of €150 per week by 2007 (to be inflation adjusted). Linking the target amount to average industrial earnings means that the Government must increase the minimum social welfare rate for all payments by €26.00 per week in 2007.

To meet its Sustaining Progress commitments regarding Child Benefit rates, (set in 2003 but postponed until 2006), the Government must increase the Child Benefit rates by €14 for the first and second child and €16 for the third and fourth child.

In an effort to increase child income support in low-income families and address child poverty, as a priority, all child dependent allowances should be increased to €25 per child per week.

In the absence of abolishing direct provision in favour of more suitable supports for asylum seekers that will allow them to live with self-respect and independence, the NWCI calls for an increase in the SWA from €19.10 to €55.50 per week for those living in direct provision. To address poverty experienced by asylum seekers urgent action is needed on behalf of the Government.

ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE FOR WOMEN

Recommendations²:

- Abolish the limitation rule for all payments.
- Increase the rate for all qualified adult payments to 100% of the personal payments and make them directly payable to the qualified adult (€370m).
- Credit homemakers work in the social insurance system by changing the 'disregards' in the homemakers scheme into homemakers 'credits' and make them retrospective.
- Introduce a means-tested parental allowance for all low-income parents of children up to the age of 8 years.

- Introduce a means-tested part-time parental allowance for all low-income parents of children aged 8 to 14.

Rationale

In households affected by the **limitation rule** many women become qualified adults because there is no economic benefit to the household if both adults were to receive an individual payment. For the majority of qualified adults, their payments go directly to their husbands. This takes away the woman's economic independence and excludes her from receiving any payments in her own right. This situation clearly keeps qualified adults dependent on their spouses and as a result vulnerable to violence, aggression, control and poverty. The Government could easily address this situation through paying the qualified adult payment directly to the qualified adult and abolishing the limitation rule. By enabling both people in a household to have direct access to a full independent payment, this will address women's poverty and increase their economic independence.

The instance of poverty amongst older women in Ireland is unacceptably high at 45%³. This is due to the fact that many older women do not have access to an independent income through the state pension system. The majority (95%) of **qualified adults** are women, many of whom were excluded from the labour market because of their care and parenting work. They now face an old age of living in poverty. The Government has committed itself in Sustaining Progress to increasing the qualified adult payment to 100% of the full personal payment. Budget 2007 is the Government's final chance to honour this commitment.

2 Costings Source: Department of Social and Family Affairs, July 2006

3 Central Statistics Office (2005), Women and Men in Ireland, Dublin: Stationery Office.

By providing ‘credits’ instead of ‘disregards’ in the **Homemakers Scheme** up to a maximum of 20 years and extending cover to maternity benefit, the Government will acknowledge care work as an important contribution to our society. In its concluding comments (July 2005), the Convention of the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) recommended that the ‘*State party consider allowing for the Homemakers Scheme (1994) to be applied retroactively so as to benefit older women*’⁴. If the Government implements the CEDAW recommendations, women who spent a large part of their lives parenting and caring who are now living in poverty, will have a better chance of being eligible for a full and independent state pension.

A **parental allowance payment** will assist parents of young children living on low income make choices regarding combining parenting and paid employment, regardless of family status. It will enable qualified adults to access an independent social welfare payment and decrease their risk of poverty. A part-time means tested parental allowance will allow parents of older children the opportunity to parent part-time while accessing part-time employment. This will acknowledge parents’ choice regarding caring for their children at home while simultaneously facilitating them to seek employment part-time.

ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT

Recommendations:

- Increase the number of Job Facilitators and their budget allocations to work on a case-load basis with lone parents and qualified adults.
- Allow homemakers re-entering the labour market a re-entry credit so that they can access benefits immediately based on previous employment.

Rationale

Supports to access training, education and employment on an individual basis for lone parents and qualified adults are critical for skills development and accessing work that provides security and the opportunity to progress in employment. Increasing the numbers of Job Facilitators who are well trained and well resourced and who provide childcare and travel subsidies, is critical to support low-income parents to move out of social welfare dependency and poverty.

The **2-year rule** prevents a person with no social insurance record for more than 2 years from accessing benefits until they have made 26 contributions. This particularly affects women who spent years out of the labour market due to parenting and care work. Reform of this rule is necessary for older women to enable transition from parenting and care work to paid employment.

4 United Nations (2005), Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Concluding Comments: Ireland, United Nations, p.8.

CHILDCARE

Recommendations

- Extend Maternity Benefit from 22 weeks to 26 weeks, as committed in Budget 2006.
- Introduce 4 weeks paid parental leave (€35m).
- Introduce three days paternity leave (€5m).
- Initiate Universal early education for three and four year olds on a phased implementation over three years (2006 – 2008) (€178m).
- Initiate Subsidised extended care for three and four year olds on a phased implementation over three years (2006 – 2008) (€46m).

Rationale

The need to develop a quality childcare infrastructure in Ireland is now widely recognised (NESF 2005, NESC 2005, OECD 2004). The NWCI has recommended the development of a publicly subsidised model of Early Childhood Care

and Education in its publication 'An Accessible Childcare Model' (NWCI 2005) which would be introduced incrementally over a 15-year time frame. The model is child centred and prioritises the development of a quality and affordable childcare infrastructure for all children.

For Budget 2007 the NWCI are prioritising the introduction of paid parental leave so that parents can choose to be at home with their child for the first year of their child's life. The benefits to children for being with their parents in their first year of life has been recommended by research on childcare, (OECD 2004, NESF 2005).

The introduction of a free universal place for children aged three and four before they enter primary school is critical for the development of children and is a fundamental component of a quality childcare infrastructure.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING

NATIONAL WOMEN'S STRATEGY

Recommendations

- Allocate a specific budget line over and above existing measures aimed at women for the implementation of specific initiatives set out in the National Women's Strategy.
- Ring-fence €300,000 for the establishment and operation of a national steering committee to monitor and oversee the implementation of the strategy.
- Ring-fence €1.5 million for the establishment of strategies and mechanisms to promote women's

access to political decision making, including the establishment and maintenance of a women's political caucus.

- Ring-fence €2 million for the establishment of supports for community-based women's organisations.

Rationale

It is critical that resources are allocated to coincide with the development of the National Women's Strategy. The Strategy is long overdue and will be the key mechanism for the Irish Government's to promote true equality for women. The strategy should be an ambitious one setting out clearly a range of measures required to address the on-going inequality that women experience. In order for the strategy to be effective in promoting women's participation in all aspects of social, economic and cultural life, however, new and specific resources are required.

HEALTH & WELL BEING OF WOMEN

HEALTH AND WELL BEING OF WOMEN ACROSS THE LIFE CYCLE

NWCI subscribe to a social view of health and acknowledge that health is socially determined. Women's health is influenced by a range of factors such as women's equality, income adequacy, access to employment, education, access to transport and services including those addressed above.

DEVELOP AN UPDATED WOMEN'S HEALTH POLICY

Recommendation

- Allocate a discrete budget line for the development and implementation of an updated National policy on women's health, including provision for comprehensive stakeholder involvement, targeted actions, monitoring and evaluation (€2.5m).

Rationale

The policy on women's health has not been updated since it was published in 1997. The Women's Health Council (WHC)⁵ has highlighted the need for the inclusion of a gendered approach to policy, programmes and research. Many of

the health policies, strategies and programmes developed since 1997 are lacking in gender analysis that takes account of the health impacts of women's continued inequality, or women's specific health needs.

PROMOTE ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES FOR THOSE IN POVERTY AND DISADVANTAGE

Recommendations

- Allocate €500m⁶ to extend medical card coverage to 40% of the population
- Provide medical cards to all children up to age 18
- Introduce a cost of disability payment for disabled people

Rationale

Extending the medical card will ensure that women in poverty have improved access to health services. The 'Agreed Programme for Government' (2002) includes the targeting of health inequalities as an objective to building an inclusive society. Those living in poverty, the majority of whom are women, are more likely to be sick and less likely to receive the care they need. Financial problems have been cited to be a major factor preventing women improving their health.⁷ Medical card cover has fallen to an historic low, despite the changes to eligibility in 2005.

One in five children in Ireland lives in poverty, and one in ten lives in consistent

5 WHC (2005) Report of the Forum on Women's Health and WHC (2005) Mental Health (2004 & 2005) Cardiovascular Disease A Gendered Approach REFERENCE

6 Based on Appendix 2, Tussing AD & Wren MA (2006) The Health Report, ICTU

7 NWCI (2004) Women Creating Change, IFM Report

income poverty (low income and deprived of basic necessities). **Access to health care is critical for children** living in poverty to minimise the negative health impacts of poverty and to promote their health into the future as adults.

In the 2002 Programme for Government there was a commitment to complete a report on the cost of disability. The National Disability Authority (NDA)⁸ called for the introduction of a **Cost of Disability payment** because the cost of living, including access to health services is higher for people with disabilities.

PROMOTE THE HEALTH OF WOMEN IN IRELAND

Recommendations

- Allocate €1m for gender equality measures to ensure that gender is incorporated into health strategies including National Mental Health, Cardiovascular and Cancer strategies and strategies to ensure reduction of premature death amongst women in Ireland.
- Allocate €1.5m to resource community based women's organisations to continue to meet gaps in services through delivery of services including cervical cancer screening, mental health promotion and counselling.

Rationale

Women in Ireland continue to have lower life expectancy, poorer health and lack of access to health promotion, disease prevention and treatment than women in Europe.⁹ Women living in poverty and in

vulnerable groups including older women, Traveller women, disabled women, lesbians, migrant women, isolated rural women and those living in disadvantaged urban areas are particularly disadvantaged with regard to health services. Women's equality in health should be incorporated into all Government strategies particularly those on Mental Health, Cardiovascular Disease and Cancer through provision of specific health promotion, disease prevention and effective primary and secondary care when required.

There is an absence of locally accessible health services for women. For example; the Irish Cervical Screening Programme (ICSP) is only available to women in the mid-Western region.

The Crisis Pregnancy Agency¹⁰ (2004) highlighted the lack of contraceptive services, particularly in rural areas. In order to meet gaps in services community-based women's organisations have responded by providing locally accessible women's health services such as mental health counselling, cervical cancer screening and contraceptive services. However, these organisations receive only limited funding for this service provision.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Recommendations:

- Funding for specialist services working on violence against women must be increased from €12 million to €19 million and a national funding framework for NGO's working on violence against women must be developed by 2007. Funding for violence against women

8 NDA (2004) Disability and the Cost of Living

9 CSO (2004) Women and Men in Ireland & Measuring Ireland's Progress

10 Crisis Pregnancy Agency (2004). Report No. 5 *Contraceptive Needs: The Evidence*. Dublin: CPA

should be ring fenced for frontline service responses only.

- The 6 Government departments¹¹ which have a role in responding to, and preventing violence against women, should develop dedicated budget lines by 2007.
- Funding must be committed to the strategic plan of the National Steering Committee on Violence against Women.

Rationale

Violence against women remains a significant problem in Irish society. Research has shown that 15% of women experience severe domestic abuse¹² and

that 20.4% of adult women have experienced sexual violence¹³. Despite yearly increased running costs, funding for these services has not increased since 2002 and is insufficient. In 2003 almost 1 in 3 calls to the Women's Aid Helpline went unanswered and 40% of women seeking refuge were refused accommodation¹⁴. Funding must be increased in order to ensure that women can access violence against women services. In order to ensure the long-term development of services, a national funding framework must be developed.

11 Department of Health and Children, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Department of the Environment, Department of Education and Science, Department of Social, Family and Community Affairs and Department of Community, Rural and Gaelic Affairs.

12 National Crime Council and ESRI, *Domestic Abuse of Women and Men in Ireland: Report on the National Study on Domestic Abuse*, Dublin, 2005.

13 McGee et al, *The Savi Report: Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland; A National Study of Irish Experiences, Beliefs and Attitudes Concerning Sexual Violence*, Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, 2002

14 Women's Aid National Freephone Helpline Statistics, 2004.

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