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Budget 2022 Gender Analysis

Compiled by TASC – Think Tank for Action on
Social Change

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National Women's Council

Overview

Budget 2022 represents the first budget of Ireland's post-Covid 19 economic recovery. With borrowing costs currently low and tax receipts buoyant relative to recent projections, Ireland has space to implement ambitious policies aimed at tackling gender inequality and social injustices. However, progress on gender equalising budgetary policy has, to date, been disappointing. The impact of Budget 2022 is similarly more of the same.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is imperative that national spending and government budgets reflect a prioritisation of measures to combat rising social and economic inequalities. Marginalised groups (including migrants, people living in poverty, Travellers and other ethnic minorities, the elderly, disabled persons, persons with mental health issues, lone parents, students/young workers and so on) have been some of the most affected populations by the pandemic, specifically in the areas of health, employment and social welfare. Many of those groups who were impacted the most from Covid-19 and the lockdowns were already struggling with the impact of over ten years of reduced spending on certain essential public services and social welfare provisions that have yet to reach pre-2008 financial crash levels.

“Gender budgeting” focuses on how national public expenditures impact on gender equality and the well-being of women and girls, in particular those who are more at-risk of experiencing additional inequalities based on their socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, age, disability and/or sexual orientation. According to feminist economist Diane Elson,¹ “the key question is: what impact does this fiscal measure have on gender equality? Does it reduce gender inequality; increase it; or leave it unchanged?”.

In this analysis, we examine the Irish Government’s 2022 Budget through this critical gendered lens, and develop a gendered analysis of the government’s decisions on spending, tax expenditures and revenue raising. Using an intersectional feminist approach (in so far as possible given the limited availability of disaggregated data) allowed us to scrutinise the impact of Budget 2022 and related national policy on the most marginalised populations and groups in Irish society. We explored the following six main and intersecting areas in our analysis:

- Income
- Gender and wage policy
- Care
- Health
- Housing
- Violence against women

In order to frame our investigation, we applied Quinn’s (2017) three stages of gender proofing, which include the following: (1) assessing differential impact, (2) scrutinising how the budget has satisfied needs of recipients and (3) examining challenges/barriers faced by groups. This assessment was necessary in order to determine whether the 2022 Budget has reduced, exacerbated or left unchanged gender inequality.

¹ Elson, 2001 (p. 16) https://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/genderbudgetinitiatives_eng.pdf

In 2016, the Irish government made a commitment to ensure that future national budgets would be subject to equality and gender proofing.² Further, in the 2020 Programme for Government, the current government further stated that all changes in social welfare would be equality and gender proofed.³ According to the Programme for Government:

“As we emerge from the COVID pandemic, we must build upon the unity, which was fundamental in our response, to improve outcomes for those who are struggling on low incomes, struggling with caring responsibilities, having to raise their families alone, or living with a disability.”

However, Budget 2022 made no direct reference to gender and equality proofing⁴. There are also real concerns that the lack of sufficient supports allocated in Budget 2022 to social welfare and public programmes marked a return to post-2008 government policy, that prioritises a “book balancing” austerity approach over one that prioritises social wellbeing and combatting inequality. For instance, spending on public services and on social welfare relative to national income is set to fall in the coming years.⁵ Women disproportionately use and rely on the welfare state.

Also, the lack of available disaggregated data in Ireland is a significant barrier to understanding the impact of the Budget on women from the most disadvantaged groups. At the NWC Webinar event⁶ on the 10 November 2021, a number of speakers highlighted issues in relation to this. Maria Jikijela, from the Great Care Coop, noted that the majority of care workers are women and a significant amount are migrant women, often working for low pay and under insecure working conditions. Maria highlighted that to address this there is a need to invest in not-for-profit models of care to benefit both care workers and clients. In regards to the specific impact on third level students, Caoimhe O’Carroll from the USI spoke about how many young women students who are living at home because they cannot afford housing to live independently also end up taking on caring responsibilities in the family home. Long-parents remain the most disadvantaged group in Ireland, and Kuxi Ghai, from SPARK maintained that small increases in the budget will not make a meaningful difference to addressing poverty and deprivation experienced by lone parents. Budget 2022 on the whole, she argues, will not do much to make it easier for low-income families to access childcare. And finally, Shelly Gaynor, Independent Living Movement Ireland, drew attention to the experiences of disabled women. She stated that while Budget 2022 increases in Personal Assistance hours would be beneficial for disabled women, hours have not increased for a number of years and unmet need for PAS and other supports to live independently contributes to a situation where over 2000 disabled people are living in inappropriate institutional settings. A €5 increase in Disability Allowance will not address the high rate of poverty among disabled people, especially for disabled women who are mothers and have caring responsibilities and Disability Allowance remains less than 2008 levels.

The analysis presented by the speakers at the NWC Webinar Event echo the analysis we present in the following sections. It is important to note that Budget 2022 did make some welcome allocations of funding to several key areas in relation to women’s issues – for example, the €31 million in investments for women’s health including free contraception for women aged 17-25, as well as ring-fenced funding for the continued implementation of the national maternity strategy. There have also been welcome increases to care. However, we fear that the piecemeal supports offered by Budget 2022 are not sufficient to counteract the leading systemic national crises (such as those in relation to housing, mental health and the rising cost of living) that are currently having a disproportionate impact on women and children living in Ireland, in particular lone parents, those living in poverty and those in low-paid work.

² OECD (2017) <https://www.oecd.org/gov/budgeting/equality-budgeting-in-ireland.pdf>

³ Our Shared Future (2020) <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e05d-programme-for-government-our-shared-future/>

⁴ <https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/budget-2022-5580387-Oct2021/>

⁵ See: <https://notesonthefront.typepad.com/politiceconomy/2021/10/no-we-are-not-becoming-a-big-state.html> and <https://notesonthefront.typepad.com/politiceconomy/2021/10/squeezing-the-social.html>

⁶ See: <https://www.nwci.ie/learn/article/urgent-structural-reforms-for-women-and-equality-still-missing-in-budget-20>

Tax, income and welfare measures

As mentioned previously, gender budgeting assesses the impact of budgetary policy on economic equality between men and women. Ireland introduced equality budgeting on a pilot basis in 2016, which includes gender equality. This is the process whereby policies across government departments are 'equality proofed' for their impact on minority, disadvantaged and under-represented groups. The Department of Finance incorporates equality considerations into its tax policy and is supported by the ESRI which provides technical assistance to do so.⁷

In this vein, Doorley et al. examine the gender impact of Irish budgetary policy over a ten-year period.⁸ They separate 2008-12, the austerity years, and 2012-18, the recovery. The budgetary impact of austerity hit men and women equally, whereas the recovery marginally favoured men. However, despite the fact that the gender impact over the entire period was comparatively small, there were important differences among women. Lone parents, who are overwhelmingly women and who are at a high risk-of-poverty, were most adversely impacted. An important policy change in this period was tightening eligibility for the One Parent Family Payment.

As for the impact of the pandemic, the combined impact of last year's budget tax and welfare measures on the one hand, and employment losses as a result of the pandemic on the other, has also been modelled.⁹ Overall, the recession initially hit men more in income terms, presumably due to employment losses as opposed to budgetary measures. Though women are disproportionately represented in low-pay sectors most impacted by the lockdown, they are also disproportionately represented in essential, frontline services. Income data for the lockdown is not yet available, but it is predicted that the gender pay gap will increase as a result of the pandemic. Excluding welfare payments, differences in income are not likely to change as though the gender pay gap increases, this is compensated by the greater fall in hours worked by men. The overall gender income gap, driven by differences in employment, hours worked in a job, and hourly pay, was 35.7% in 2018. Despite the greater fall in hours worked by men during the pandemic, women are slightly more represented in wage subsidy supports, and may be at high risk of unemployment when such supports expire.¹⁰ These women will be at risk of being in poverty unless employment can be found.¹¹

Budget 2022 contained a number of welfare and taxation measures, though changes were generally small. The main measures were increases of €5 per week to all pension payments and to all social welfare payments to working age recipients. As regards pensions the state not only spending on public pensions, but also provides a number of tax subsidies to encourage private pension use, subsidies which mainly accrue to men.¹² The latter includes One Parent Family Payment, and more.¹³ There was also an extension in leave that parents are allowed to take under Parent's Benefit, from five weeks to seven. While two parent families can benefit from fourteen weeks paid leave, lone parents are only entitled to seven. Child benefit was unchanged, which constitutes a fall after inflation is taken into account. Several tax measures were also introduced, the main being an adjustment of income beyond which the higher rate of tax is paid, from €35,300 to €36,800.¹⁴

As mentioned, women are more dependent on wage subsidy supports than men and these supports are due to end next year. Traditionally active labour market policies have been tailored towards men and

⁷ See: <https://www.oecd.org/gov/budgeting/equality-budgeting-in-ireland.pdf>

⁸ See: <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2018-10/bkmnext367.pdf>

⁹ See https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/QEC2020WIN_SA_Doorley.pdf

¹⁰ See: <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/OPEA189.pdf>

¹¹ 13.6% of women are at risk of poverty compared to 12.6% of men in 2019. See:

<https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

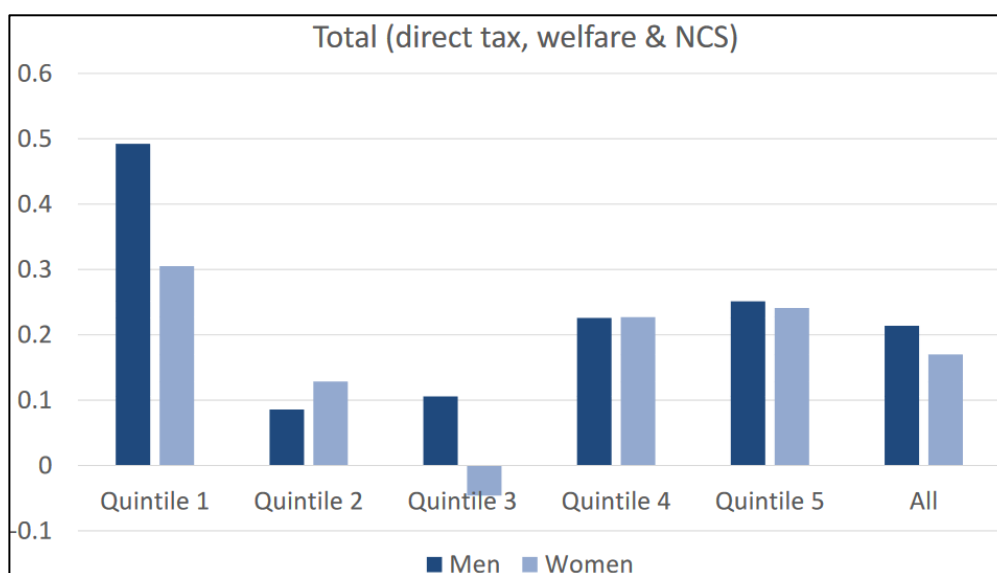
¹² See: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/social-policy-and-society/article/abs/private-pensions-and-the-gender-distribution-of-fiscal-welfare/4AF3ACAABDA5DE26CD918E0DDB321F00>

¹³ See: <https://assets.gov.ie/11117/6beb1ad2f51346f4ad6f27db1c473e59.pdf>

¹⁴ See: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e491-taxation-measures/>

pre-pandemic men were more likely to be unemployed than women. However, that gender gap has now been closed. Spending on Local Employment Services is set to drop significantly from €25.8m in 2021 to €9.91m in 2022. This is likely to impact on those most distant from the labour market, predominantly women – lone parents, qualified adults, carers and disabled people. The emerging unemployment dynamics post-Covid requires a greater tailoring of active labour market policies toward the needs of women.

The figure below shows the gender impact of Budget 2022. Specifically, it shows how changes in direct taxation, welfare, and the national childcare scheme affect men and women’s disposable income. Quintile 1 refers to the bottom 20% whereas Quintile 5 refers to the top 20% in terms of income received. Overall, the impact of the budget is small and favours men, but only marginally so. Both men and women experience an increase in income of approximately 0.2%. Women in the bottom 20% of the income distribution see smaller gains than their male counterparts. This is due to cuts to child benefit in real terms. This impacts low-income and lone-parent women given their greater dependence on transfers. The gender impact of the budget is generally less striking further up the income distribution, aside from the middle quintile where women actually experience a fall in their income. Lone parents are to see a fall in their income in real terms. Being less likely to work, they do not benefit from tax reductions and because child benefit fell in real terms.



Source: Doorley (2021)¹⁵

Overall then, the budget is unlikely to improve gender economic inequality, with lone parents likely to be worse off. This year’s budget is similar to recent budgets, which were gender neutral. There is also the possibility that the gender pay gap will widen. The next section looks at wages in more detail.

Gender and wage policy

In 2019, the gender pay gap was 11.3%.¹⁶ The proximate cause is very high differences in pay between highly-paid men and less well-paid but also highly-paid women. Gender differences in pay also exist toward the middle and lower end of the pay distribution, albeit are considerably lower.¹⁷ Those who are in less well-paid position are, of course, more vulnerable and have less economic autonomy.

¹⁵ See: https://www.esri.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2021-10/SLIDES_post%20Budget%20Briefing_DOORLEY_1.pdf

¹⁶ See: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender_pay_gap_statistics

¹⁷ See:

<https://www.nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/2020/Unadjusted%20gender%20pay%20gap%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20and%20the%20Republic%20of%20Ireland%202020%201.pdf>

Someone is low pay if their hourly earnings are less than two thirds the median. As of 2018, 14.9% of Irish workers were in low pay jobs. This is lower than most EU countries, but above the EU average. This is because several countries have a very low incidence of low pay. Among low pay workers, 18.3% are women compared to 12% of men. Low pay is therefore a gendered phenomenon.¹⁸ This is also true of minimum wage workers, who comprise 6.8% of the workforce. The share of minimum wage workers who are women grew during the crisis and currently stands at 56.5%.¹⁹

It is widely recognised that the minimum wage is not sufficient to provide for a minimally decent standard of living. The Living Wage, however, is an attempt to do just that. It is based on surveys of households of what are the essentials which households could not do without. The Living Wage threshold is very similar to Low Pay threshold, which is calculated somewhat differently. The Programme for Government has committed to moving the minimum wage to a living wage over the lifetime of the government.

The Living Wage for the period 2021/22 has been calculated to be €12.90 per hour. This is an increase of almost 5% over the previous year, or 60c.²⁰ The increase was, as with previous years, mostly a result of increases in rent. The increase in the Living Wage compares with an increase in the minimum wage under Budget 2022 of just 30c from €10.20 to €10.50, which amounts to an increase of 2.5%. The increase in the minimum wage has therefore been insufficient to maintain the living standards of those trying to survive on low pay. The increase is also at odds with the government's commitment to move toward a Living Wage. The impact will be disproportionately felt by women.

Tackling pay differences at the higher end involves getting more women in leadership positions. A 2017 ESRI study²¹ of women employed at senior levels within the civil service identified several key barriers to promotions for women. These included a lack of structured handover and induction in more senior roles; a lack of self-confidence; as well as, most notably, the lack of opportunities for more flexible work arrangements for those in senior roles. The study found that many women can be deterred from pursuing opportunities to advance to more senior positions due to the lack of options for combining work with child and/or eldercare responsibilities.

In light of recent changes to 'the world of work' brought on by the pandemic, there is hopefully an increased scope for workplaces to allow all workers more flexibility to help counter this imbalance. In addition, more targeted policy measures such as the 4 Day Work Week²² would also arguably have positive gendered consequences caused by less commuting time, reduced childcare costs and allowing space for both women and men to better balance their work and care responsibilities. We expand more on the subject and gendered nature of care specifically in the following section.

Care

Women undertake the majority of unpaid care of children and older people. Lack of investment in supports for disabled people infringes on their right to independent lives and results in family members, most often women, to fill this gap. The provision of care therefore plays a crucial role in the generation of economic inequality between men and women. To the extent that care, especially childcare, is not provided or funded publicly, many women will be in a position where it may make little economic sense to pursue paid work. High childcare fees, which result from low public funding and provision, mean that a high share of monthly income must be forgone. As a share of median women's earnings, Ireland has the second most expensive childcare in the EU.²³ This reflects the fact that public spending is very low in

¹⁸ See: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?QueryId=64193#>

¹⁹ See: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a8e07-low-pay-commission-annual-report-2021/>

²⁰ See: https://www.livingwage.ie/download/pdf/living_wage_annual_paper_2021-22.pdf

²¹ See: <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS66.pdf>

²² See: https://www.nwci.ie/learn/newsflash-article/nwci_joins_four_day_week_ireland_campaign

²³ See: https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/benefits-and-wages/Net%20childcare%20costs%20in%20EU%20countries_2019.pdf

comparative terms.²⁴ Low spending on and provision of care also impacts women as they comprise the overwhelming majority of care workers.

The Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE), the main source of funding, is a universal, publicly funded scheme available to all children in the two years prior to starting primary school. The scheme is offered in early years settings for three hours a day, five days a week, 38 weeks of the year. Under the scheme, the government pays the private or third-sector provider, who then provides the care. Budget 2022 left the scheme unchanged.

The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) provides financial support to parents to meet the costs of childcare and operates alongside ECCE. Up until now, it provided a universal subsidy for children under three which is not means tested and an income subsidy for children up to 15 which is means tested. The universal subsidy is 50 cents an hour (up to €1040 per year) and has been expanded under Budget 2022 to provide care for children up to the age of 15. The means-tested subsidy differs according to individual circumstances.

Increased funding into the sector will also be aimed at improving quality and guarantee that fees will not increase. The government has committed to increased funding to attract and retain staff in the sector. It will provide a career path and establish an Employment Regulation Order which sets standards for minimum pay and conditions.

A majority of the sector’s income comes from state funding and the rest is made up of parental fees. It is therefore unacceptable that the government has exerted little or no control over fees in the sector. Aside from the impact on the workers themselves, the poor pay and conditions in the sector act as a major barrier to retaining staff. Efforts to improve pay and control fees are therefore welcome. Similarly, increased supports to families and mothers in the form of expanding NCS is also welcome.

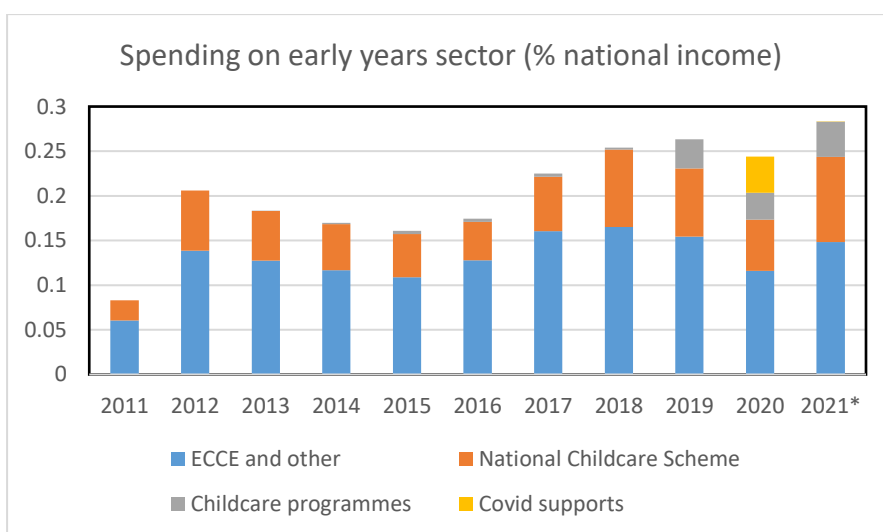


Figure 2: Public spending on early years in Ireland.
Sources: PER database and CSO and Department of Finance.
Notes: 2021 figures based on estimates for spending and national income

Despite improvements, funding for childcare remains woefully inadequate. As can be seen from the figure, spending relative to national income has been on an upward trajectory over the past decade. Despite a fall during Covid, outlays for 2021 look set to continue the upward trend of recent years. But at the current rate it would take several decades for spending to reach 1% of national income, the target set

²⁴ See: https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/cae_2020-report-final.pdf
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by UNICEF. Ireland will remain one of the, if not the least generous funders of the early years sector in the EU.

At the height of the pandemic and lockdown, the Irish state assumed responsibility for paying much of the staff in the sector. With a clear public appetite for a public model, the Government missed the opportunity to make substantial changes to establish the public model. Joint Labour Committees, whereby pay is set through union-employer agreement, can improve pay and conditions in the sector. However, without public funding to match, its effects will be limited. The government should commit to increases of 0.1% of national income per annum for the next seven years. This should be focused on the establishment on the public model which would include a progressive fee capping system, and be similar to the design and delivery of primary school education.

While an increase in funding is essential, public provision of care is also needed if the full benefits of early years investment are to be realised. Under a publicly-provided model the state can simply set fees at a rate affordable to households, and wages a level attractive for its workforce. This removes the need to manage the tension between low fees, decent pay, and financial viability under a for-profit model. More generally, it is only in countries where care is de-commodified that care work is a well-paid, secure, and hence respected. Moving care into the public sector would, of course, require somewhat higher taxes.²⁵

There was some limited investment in adult social care and Personal Assistance supports for disabled people, but nowhere near enough to address the level of unmet need. Despite talk that increasing pay for homecare workers was part of the budget deliberations, this did not transpire on budget day.²⁶ Overall, budget 2022 made limited progress on implementing the recommendations on care of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality.

Health

The Covid-19 pandemic further exposed the absolute necessity of Ireland moving towards a more robust, adequately and efficiently funded, universal model of healthcare. However, along a similar vein, the pandemic has led to a series of delays in progressing and realising the goals of Sláintecare and a national single-tier health system. There are several immense challenges to confront in the period ahead, from addressing and reducing waiting lists across the healthcare sector (which have increased exponentially for many services during Covid-19), tackling on-going issues with hospital capacity (such as the continued reliance on trollies in A&E departments), supporting on-going preventative measures to counteract the rise in health inequalities post-pandemic, as well as taking targeted approach to supporting universal access to mental health services and community supports (particularly for vulnerable groups, including young people). The long-term implications of the pandemic on the health system are still largely unknown. Research²⁷ released in November 2021 found that 20% of people are concerned they missed out on a diagnosis and treatment due to the Covid-19 pandemic. An additional 50% reported having either cancelled medical appointments or missing scheduled appointments. Also, 11% of adults reported that they did not seek treatment despite feeling unwell during this period.

In terms of women's reproductive health, the pandemic posed many challenges, but also led to some innovative thinking and strategies for on-going service provision. In terms of maternal care, public restrictions on partner attendance at hospitals during child birth as well as postnatal visits resulted in some women feeling isolated and unsupported.²⁸ As NWC notes in their paper on women living in rural areas²⁹, there were many important interventions that supported women during the crisis: such as

²⁵ https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/cae_2020-report-final.pdf

²⁶ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/pay-increase-for-homecare-workers-part-of-budget-2022-deliberations-minister-says-1.4678271>

²⁷ See: <https://www.thejournal.ie/missed-diagnosis-research-pfizer-5590618-Nov2021/>

²⁸ See: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0266613821001728>

²⁹ See: https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Women_in_rural_communities_May_2021.pdf

remote medical appointments and e-prescribing for essential services such as abortion care, access to contraception, and unplanned pregnancy counselling supports. Such protections were particularly necessary and supportive for all women in Ireland.

On the whole, Budget 2022 made some welcome funding decisions in relation to women's health³⁰, and in particular reproductive health. The 31 million euro "women's health package" included nearly €9 million additional funding to ensure continued implementation of the National Maternity Strategy throughout 2022. In addition, a further €16m in other measures to support women's health is embedded within other new measures for 2022 within the Health Vote in areas such as cancer, mental health and social inclusion budgets, bringing the overall investment in women's health to €47m in additional funding provided for 2022. It also established a further 6 ambulatory gynaecology "see and treat" clinics, bringing the total to 20 clinics nationally. An additional €5 million was also allocated into the Women's Health Fund to fund "innovative new approaches" to women's health services nationwide. There was also pledged increase in investment in efforts to tackle period poverty, as well as sexual assault treatment units. We provide further detail on the overarching funding for violence against women later on in this paper.

One of the major highlights of Budget 2022 was the almost €9 million allocated to fund access to contraception for women aged 17-25. This is a welcome development – and there is a hope that this will be the first step down the line of Ireland offering free contraception to all women and persons of reproductive age (including men, trans men and all non-binary persons). However, the 2019 Report of the Expert Working Group on Access to Contraception³¹ estimated that it would cost 18-22 million euro to support the universal roll out of contraception to persons aged 17-25, significantly more than the 9 million allocated in Budget 2022. While the scheme is due to include fitting and removal of Long Acting Reversible Contraceptives such as the IUD and IUS, it is unclear if the actual IUD/IUS devices are included. At present there is a purchase cost for IUSs of approximately 100 euro under the Drugs Payment Scheme. If these devices are not included, this will remain a significant upfront cost which might inhibit take up. Cost barriers to accessing contraception have a disproportionate impact on the most disadvantaged women and girls living in Ireland, including disabled women, Traveller and Roma women, and women affected by homelessness.³²

Another area of health that is of on-going and immense concern for women's lives and wellbeing is mental health. During the pandemic, research indicates that many women reported feeling increased stress and anxiousness (in particular those with children and who work from home). For example, according to the CSO 2020 Survey on the Social Impact of Covid-19³³, women reported lower overall life satisfaction than men, and were much more likely to be extremely concerned about their health. These figures jumped significantly for both men and women when compared to survey results from 2013 and 2018. Women also were much more likely to report feeling, 'very nervous', 'downhearted or depressed' or 'lonely' compared to men.

Figure 3 below from the CSO provides a further breakdown of these figures, giving an analysis of the percentage of respondents who felt 'downtrodden or depressed' during the reference period and divided by gender:

³⁰ See: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/309be-budget-2022-delivering-additional-31-million-for-womens-health/>

³¹ See: <https://assets.gov.ie/38063/89059243e750415ebf7e96247a4225ae.pdf>

³² <https://www.thejournal.ie/prev/5574420/dvSIT0YUDIBK6/>

³³ See: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/sic19wm/socialimpactofcovid-19onwomenandmenapril2020/>

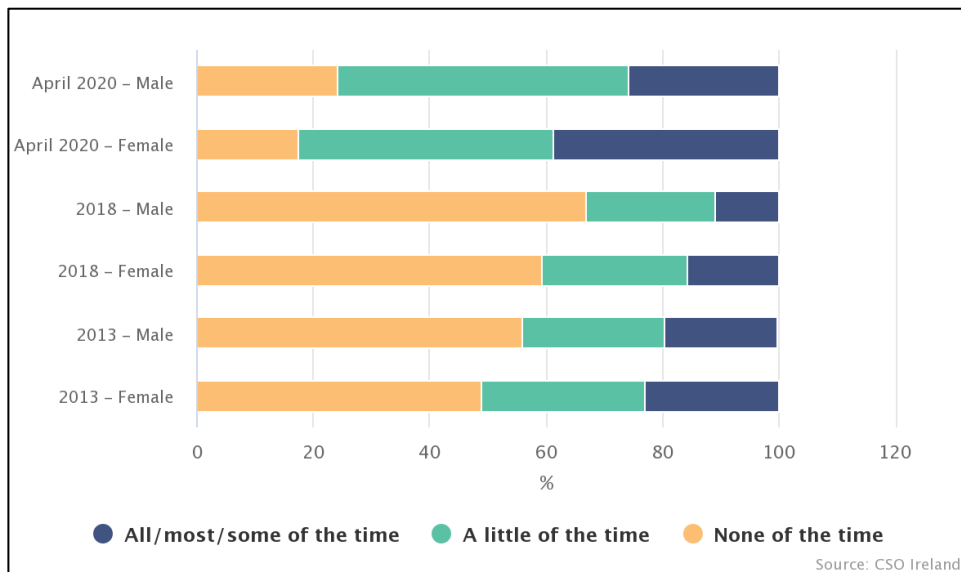


Figure 3: Feeling downtrodden or depressed by sex and reference period
Source: CSO Ireland

Despite its importance, mental health has been traditionally a significantly under-resourced area of healthcare service provision in Ireland. In its commitment to implementing the provisions of Sláintecare, the government pledged that public spending on mental health would comprise 10% of the overall health budget.³⁴ At the moment, however, this amount is about 5.1%. This is significantly less than recommended amounts from the World Health Organisation (which is around 12%) and public healthcare spending in the UK (which is around 13%).³⁵ In addition, all indicators point to the growing need for adequately resourced mental health services and community supports as we emerge from the pandemic. Researchers from the HSE and University College Cork³⁶ identified several issues specific to Covid-19 that will in all likelihood have long-lasting and intense implications for the mental health “tsunami” that will impact persons and communities post-pandemic. According to O’Connor et al. (2020)

“There are several features particular to the COVID-19 emergency that are likely to amplify and prolong both the psychosocial and the mental health burden associated with this pandemic. These features include the morbidity and mortality associated with COVID-19, the relentless media coverage, the social distancing measures, the altered pathways to access care, the changes to the care that is available, the suspension of development plans in mental health services and the economic impact on all populations in society.”

It is necessary, therefore, that the necessary safeguards and preventative supports are put in place to anticipate and support the likely surge in demand for mental health services over the coming years. Also, it is important that mental health services are designed from a gender-sensitive perspective. A gender-sensitive approach recognises how the socio-political and cultural context shapes care needs and care delivery and acknowledges how gender affects access to and the experience of healthcare.³⁷ It is therefore not just necessary for adequate funding and resources to be allocated to support mental health, but that this funding is used in such a manner that it will address the specific gendered issues and needs of those who access it.

³⁴ See: <https://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/news/slaintecare-does-not-go-far-enough-for-mental-health/>

³⁵ See: <https://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/budget-22/>

³⁶ O’Connor et al (2020) See: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7471570/>

³⁷ For more on gender-sensitive approaches to mental health services, see: BMA (2018) Addressing Unmet Needs in Women’s Health; Chandra (2019) The current status of gender-sensitive mental health services for women—findings from a global survey of experts; Michael Bergin, John S. G. Wells & Sara Owen (2013) Towards a gendered perspective for Irish mental health policy and service provision, *Journal of Mental Health*, 22:4, 350-360, DOI: 10.3109/09638237.2012.714513

In Budget 2022, the Irish government committed 37 million of ‘new money’ to mental health services (with about 13 million of this being allocated to existing services), plus a once-off payment of 10 million³⁸. This support is on top of the once-off 10 million that was allocated in February 2021 – an amount that has yet to be spent.

Ireland’s national coalition on mental health, Mental Health Reform, estimate³⁹ that, due in part to a projected increase in costs of services (staff costs, electricity, overheads, etc), as well as existing staff shortages and the growing needs of national clinic programmes, at least 85 million will be needed in 2022 to counteract the impact of the pandemic crisis, with around 20 million (at a minimum) to support existing services. Therefore, while some welcome allocations were made, on the whole there are worrying fears that Budget 2022 mental health commitments are not sufficient to meet the growing demands as a result of the pandemic. We posit that this will have a continued disproportionate impact on women’s mental health needs, in particular those who rely on public service provision and cannot afford to access private mental health care.

Housing

An enduring feature of the Irish political landscape over the last number of years has been problems in its housing system. The affordability crisis continues and the arrival of Covid has only aggravated problems. It is widely recognised that the state needs to increase the supply of public housing and the recently published *Housing for All* provides for that.

Housing shortages and the attendant affordability problems affect men and women differently. High cost of housing obviously has a material impact on living standards, which impacts those with the least means. When housing is in short supply and very expensive, it can be more difficult for women to leave abusive and violent relationships. When landlords have an abundance of tenants to choose from, traditionally marginalised groups are likely to suffer from discrimination in accessing housing. Lone parents are particularly at risk, as are non-white, especially black, and Traveller women and men.⁴⁰ For instance, a 2016 national study on women’s homelessness found that six of sixty (10%) of the group of participants identified as members of the Traveller community.⁴¹

While men are at most risk of homelessness and rough sleeping, the rate of female homelessness is much higher in Ireland compared to other European countries.⁴² Latest figures show that 2,113 women are in emergency accommodation, around a third of the total.⁴³ This figure, it should be noted, is likely an underestimation of the true scale of homelessness as those on waiting lists ‘double up’ with friends and family. It also excludes the 3,052 women and children in domestic violence refuges.⁴⁴ The high share of women experiencing homelessness requires greater gender sensitivity to address their accommodation, physical and mental health needs.

Aside from those experiencing various forms of homelessness, women are likely to be more reliant on the social housing system. This is true when viewing those actually using social housing or, it seems, waiting to use the system. According to the last census, women are somewhat more likely than men to rent from a local authority or voluntary body. While we were unable to locate a gender breakdown of the 61,880 households on the social housing waiting list, it is plausible that a majority are women. Most households on the waiting list are solely dependent on social welfare and, outside of single adults, lone

³⁸ See: <https://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/news/more-investment-needed/>

³⁹ See: <https://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/news/more-investment-needed/>

⁴⁰ See: <https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2018/06/Discrimination-and-Inequality-in-Housing-in-Ireland..pdf>

⁴¹ See: <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/21092119/harvey-b-2021-the-traveller-community-and-homelessness-pavee-point-traveller-and-roma-centre.pdf>

⁴² See: https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWCI_Womens_Health_and_Homelessness_-_6th_April_2018.pdf

⁴³ See: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e28d6-homeless-report-august-2021/>

⁴⁴ See: <https://www.svp.ie/getattachment/09abef6a-7b69-4e66-9431-5c8c490c10b6/Combating-Housing-Exclusion-in-Ireland-2021.aspx>

parents are the most common family type.⁴⁵ Similarly, around three fifths of those in receipt of Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) are women.⁴⁶ HAP tenancies are a more precarious form of housing than traditional social housing as the agreement is with the landlord, not local authority. The tenancy can therefore be terminated much more easily.

Budget 2022 contained a variety of measures to alleviate the affordability crisis. In line with *Housing for All*, Budget 2022 provides for the building of 9,000 new social homes. It also provides for the building 4,000 affordable purchase and cost rental homes, with a similar split between the two types.⁴⁷ Affordable purchase homes are aimed at enabling low-income households to purchase a home whereby the local authority takes an equity stake. Cost rental homes enable renters to rent at below market rates whereby the rent only covers the cost of delivery. The budget also supports 14,800 new households to have their housing needs met under HAP and the similar Rental Accommodation Scheme, continuing the reliance on the private sector to provide housing. This is an unsustainable solution, in particular for lone parents. Monies have also been allocated to deliver Traveller accommodation, provide emergency accommodation, and adapt homes for older people, who are more likely to be women. However, the Traveller housing budget remains at less than 50% of the 2008 allocation.⁴⁸

The adequacy of the government's housing strategy and Budget 2022 is dependent on how many homes the private sector delivers in the years to come. It assumes that the private sector will build 11,500 homes which when added to state and non-profit supply brings the total 2022 to 24,600.⁴⁹ This is inadequate to clear the backlog, as annual demand is estimated to be 33,000.⁵⁰ By 2024 non-market output will increase by only 2,000 to around 16,000 where it will remain stable until 2030. Meeting Ireland's housing need assumes the private sector will double housing output in the next six or seven years. If that hope does not come to fruition, and there is little evidence the construction sector plans to build that much, the housing crisis will remain. This could magnify the pressures on social/non-profit system, on which women depend. Finally, there has to date been no mention of women's health and other needs in emergency accommodation.

Violence against women

Violence against women and girls is a global epidemic, and the WHO estimates that 30% of worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence during their lifetime.⁵¹ The EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) survey⁵² conducted in 2014 marks the most recent comprehensive study of DSGBV (domestic, sexual and gender-based violence) prevalence in Ireland for women. It found that over 1 in 4 Irish women had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by any partner and/or non-partner since age 15. It also found that in Europe, Ireland has the second highest number of women avoiding places or situations for fear of being assaulted. Most cases of violence against women involve intimate partner violence or domestic violence, and the number of these cases skyrocketed during the pandemic and the public health lockdowns. In Ireland, national organisations and charities who provide support to survivors of domestic violence were inundated with calls and requests for support during the pandemic.

For instance, Women's Aid, a national domestic violence service, responded to a 38% increase in calls to their 24-hour National Freephone Helpline in 2020 versus 2019.⁵³ In 2020, there were 57,277 calls to local and national violence helplines, 23,785 incidents reported to the Gardaí, and 4,000 breaches of

⁴⁵ See: <https://www.housingagency.ie/sites/default/files/2021-03/SSHA-2020.pdf>

⁴⁶ See: <https://jgees.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/SIA-Series-Social-Housing-Supports-1.pdf>

⁴⁷ See: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/cb7ac-expenditure-reports/>

⁴⁸ Harvey, B. (2021). Budget 2022 – what it means for funding voluntary and community organisations. Presentation for The Wheel, 15th October 2021

⁴⁹ See: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ef5ec-housing-for-all-a-new-housing-plan-for-ireland/>

⁵⁰ See: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ef5ec-housing-for-all-a-new-housing-plan-for-ireland/>

⁵¹ See: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

⁵² See: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/violence-against-women-eu-wide-survey-main-results-report>

⁵³ See: https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/womens_aid_annual_impact_report_2020.pdf

protective orders. Safe Ireland, national network of domestic violence services, recorded from March – August 2020, nearly 3,500 women and 600 children⁵⁴ contacted a domestic violence service for the first time during this period. This equates to 19 women and 3 new children each day. In addition, there were 1,351 unmet requests⁵⁵ for emergency accommodation. In their 2020 annual report, Dublin Rape Crisis Centre reported that their cases increased three-fold during the summer of 2020 compared to previous years, as the lockdown restrictions eased. In total, there were 13,438 contacts to the DRCC’s national 24-hour helpline in 2020, with 6,451 first-time contacts and 5,349 repeat contacts.

There is an on-going and strong global movement, led by activists and feminist organisations, that works to ensure that violence against women, and intimate partner violence in particular, is recognised as a systemic issue and within the realm of State responsibility. Thus, since the 1990s, international and national inter-governmental bodies have developed a normative framework that recognises violence against women in all forms as a violation of human rights, even when the perpetrator is a non-state or private actor. The Istanbul Convention is a human rights treaty from the Council of Europe that specifically recognises the ‘structural nature of violence against women as gender-based violence’, and highlights ‘domestic violence’, a form of violence that takes place in the private sphere, throughout its provisions. Ireland has clear commitments under the Istanbul Convention which it ratified in 2019.⁵⁶

Similarly, the World Health Organisation recommends that violence against women is seen as a serious public health problem and violation of women’s human rights. The WHO is clear that violence is preventable if policy makers adopt a coordinated and resourced multi-strand approach based on the RESPECT framework: Relationship skills strengthening; Empowerment of women; Services ensured; Poverty reduced; Enabling environments (schools, work places, public spaces) created; Child and adolescent abuse prevented; and Transformed attitudes, beliefs and norms.⁵⁷

In 2020, the Programme for Government marked the first recognition of the “epidemic” of the domestic violence in Ireland.⁵⁸The Programme pledged to undertake a number of important provisions, including the development of the third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence, establish a plan for future refuge spaces and support training for law enforcement to better recognise “coercive control” as a pervasive and unique facet of domestic violence.

The Government is currently developing this Third Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence, in a partnership process with the National Women’s Council and Safe Ireland and in consultation with the wider civil society sector. There is significant expectation that the new Strategy will be ambitious and require a significant increase in investment to address violence against women. Budget 2022 did not deliver significant increases that would provide for a new Strategy and it is unclear where that allocation will come from for the implementation of the new Strategy in 2022.

On the whole, the spending on supports for people who have suffered domestic, sexual and gender-based violence was increased by only €5 million in Budget 2022, bringing it up to €13 million.⁵⁹ This amount is inclusive of a €1 million commitment to improve Garda Divisional Protective Services Units ability to respond to domestic violence situations. However, with the recent scandals involving between 3 and 4,000 cancelled 999 calls relating to domestic and/or gender-based violence in 2019-2020⁶⁰, there are concerns that this amount will do little to address the severe internal policing shortcomings to respond to these cases.

⁵⁴ See: <https://www.safeireland.ie/policy-publications/>

⁵⁵ See: <https://www.safeireland.ie/oireachtas-committee-alerted-to-national-domestic-violence-crisis/>

⁵⁶ See: <https://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PR19000066>

⁵⁷ See: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

⁵⁸ See: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e05d-programme-for-government-our-shared-future/>

⁵⁹ See: <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/justice-package-aims-to-improve-supports-for-domestic-violence-victims-40942359.html>

⁶⁰ See: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/more-than-3-000-domestic-violence-999-calls-marked-cancelled-by-garda-1.4601760>

In addition, there was no specific allocation or recognition of any commitment for emergency, transitional, or long-term accommodation and housing for women and children who are trying to exit abusive situations – an issue that was raised repeatedly by domestic violence frontline support services. Overall, the level of investment allocated in Budget 2022 and the nature of activity funded falls far short of the integrative, preventative approach the World Health Organisation recommends.

Conclusion – Budget 2022 and the move to austerity

According to our analysis, the resources allocated in Budget 2022 do not take the necessary steps to combat gender inequality in Ireland. We posit, in fact, that the Budget may increase gender inequality on certain fronts – particularly for those women who are survivors of domestic violence, who are living in poverty and those in low-paid work. While some targeted supports were welcome, the overall budget will continue to move away from the needed investment in public services for the sake of balancing government expenditure as the country emerges from the pandemic.