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# Her Rural Future

Key Demands for Women in Rural Ireland

We in the National Women's Council want Ireland to be a country where every woman enjoys true equality and no woman is left behind.

The National Women's Council is the leading national representative organisation for women and women's groups in Ireland. It was founded in 1973. We have more than 190-member groups and a large and growing community of individual supporters.

Women are at the heart of our rural communities. They are central to making rural Ireland a better place to live, work and bring up a family. But, too often, their contribution remains undervalued and unseen.

This document outlines key challenges and solutions for women in rural Ireland and calls on decision-makers to

- listen to women's voices and experiences when making decisions about rural policies and investment, and
- recognise and tackle the causes of inequality for women in rural areas.

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# Women in rural Ireland face additional challenges

## Underrepresentation



Women in rural communities are severely underrepresented in decision making structures at local level:

- only one in four members of local authorities are women, similar to figures in Northern Ireland, compared to the EU average of almost one in three members,
- in sixteen rurally based councils, there are fewer than five women councillors,
- very few women councillors are disabled, or from a migrant background, and
- we have never had a Traveller or Roma woman represented in local government.

Decision making structures overseeing policies and investment into rural communities are consistently overrepresented by men. The lack of women's voices and representation makes it more difficult to ensure rural policies, including climate action policies, take women's needs and perspectives into account.

The women's community sector, which is a vital support for women in rural Ireland, continues to be underfunded and inadequately resourced. In Northern Ireland, only 3% of government funding for women's groups goes towards women in rural communities.

## Isolation and long distances



Women in rural communities often face long travel distances to access basic services and supports, for example:

- the average distance for the supermarket, pharmacy and GP is about seven times longer for rural households than for urban households,
- significant parts of the island have no access to a rail network, in rural areas more than an hour from Belfast, access to key services by public transport is particularly poor,
- many women do not have access to a car and rely on public transport. Over 70% of older people without a driving licence are women, more than half of all women aged 75 or older do not have a driving licence, and
- nearly 50% of women aged 65+ have "unmet" transport needs. This has particular consequences for health and wellbeing.

Access to reproductive health services, including abortion, can be very challenging because:

- there are difficulties in supplying specialist services, such as health screening. Less specialist staff exist in rural areas because training is typically provided in urban locations,
- only 1 in 10 GPs are providing abortion services and only 11 out of the 19 maternity units around the country are providing full services in line with the law, and
- the three-day waiting period to access abortion may require two visits to the GP.

## Unequal sharing of caring responsibilities and attitudes favouring men

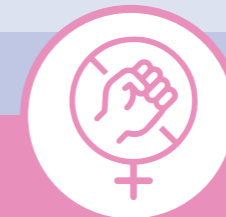


Women in rural communities are more likely to be the main carers of other members of the household. This makes women more economically dependent on others and is a barrier to women's full participation in economic, political and social life. The percentage of family carers living in rural areas is higher, at almost 42%.

Women's contribution to farming and other family businesses can go largely unnoticed and unrecognised in statistics and policies. Inheritance and succession continue to favour men. Women farmers make up just 12% (16,100) of the 137,100 family farms in the country and just 3.8% of farms are registered with the Department of Agriculture in joint ownership.

Despite CSO figures showing that over a quarter of those working on farms (71,700) are women, their work is rarely officially recognised and they are essentially treated as a minority group.

## Violence against Women



Women in rural areas who experience violence and abuse face challenges in accessing support. The incidence of domestic abuse in rural areas has significantly increased. Violence against women in rural communities is worsened by:

- the greater rate of women's economic dependency in these communities, eg. older rural women are even less likely than older urban women to have an occupational pension,
- the likelihood of abuse continuing for longer
- the prevalence of underreporting and protection of perpetrators
- stigma in accessing support services, such as domestic violence and mental health services, and
- a lack of culturally appropriate services for Traveller and Roma women.

## Poverty and lack of infrastructure



The cost of living crisis, austerity measures and lack of investment in care and services has ongoing and disproportionate effect on women's economic position across the island. Single pensioner and lone parent households are two of the main household groupings at the highest risk of poverty, both of which are predominantly women.

Since 2021, the core cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living has increased by an average of 5% for urban households and 14% for rural households. Women are also affected by an overall decline in rural infrastructure like the closure of shops, acute hospitals, post offices and garda stations.

- The absolute and relative number of rural Irish GPs has been falling over the past 20 years, single-handed GP practices, particularly in rural and remote parts of Ireland, are finding it increasingly difficult to find a successor, maternity or locum cover, and
- Women accessing post-natal GP care also experience a geographical disparity. Nationally, almost 85% of women attended the two-week post-natal appointment while less than half of women in Donegal, Leitrim and Sligo attended.



**Key demands by women for rural Ireland**  
Tackling inequalities for women in rural Ireland will require:

**1. Active participation**  
Ensure women have an equal say in the decisions affecting their lives

**2. Public services**  
Provide access to the services that women need

**3. Public Transport**  
Deliver accessible public transport adapted to women's lives

**4. Reproductive health**  
Provide choice and access locally to reproductive healthcare services for women

**5. Sustainability**  
Ensure climate action policies work for women

**6. Decent standard of living**  
Tackle poverty and provide a decent income

**7. Ending violence against women**  
Ensure a zero-tolerance approach to violence against women in all rural communities

**8. Political Life**  
Increase women's political representation

**9. Community Sector**  
Recognise the important role of the women's community sector for women in rural communities

**10. Agriculture**  
Recognise and support women's work in agriculture

## 1. Active participation

### Ensure women have an equal say in the decisions affecting their lives

Women want to be heard and involved in the decisions that affect their lives. Investment should clearly show that women are benefitting equally from programmes such as Leader and the Rural Social Scheme. Rural programmes, policies and structures must reflect the diverse lives, experiences and needs of all women. They must:

- support the full and equal participation of all women, and
- provide targeted measures to include the voices of marginalised women.

## 2. Public services

### Provide access to the services that women need

We must increase and sustain our investment in public services and infrastructure to make them accessible locally across all rural communities.

Critical public services for women in rural communities include:

- health services in remote and isolated areas,
- locally accessible and affordable, public, quality childcare, and
- affordable housing and accommodation.

## 3. Public transport

### Deliver accessible public transport adapted to women's lives

We must invest in reliable, safe, cost-effective public transport that recognises how women use transport and the journeys they make. Women make more complicated journeys that can include getting groceries, dropping and picking up children, and visiting older parents. Accessible public transport is a lifeline for many women in rural Ireland. It is essential for women:

- on low incomes,
- without access to a car,
- who are disabled and older, and
- those living in direct provision.

## 4. Reproductive health

### Provide choice and access locally to reproductive healthcare services for women

We need GP and practice nurse coverage in every community and access to maternity care, including maternity hospitals, for women in rural areas. An integrated model for reproductive healthcare for women in rural areas must include:

- free, universal and accessible contraception including pharmacist-prescribing of contraceptives,
- incentivising GPs to set up in rural Ireland and training needs to incorporate
- specific time spent in rural Ireland,
- outreach and mobile health screening services, and
- use of technology to enhance access which includes remote and online access to health services to complement in person services.

## 5. Sustainability

### Ensure climate action policies work for women

Climate change has a significant impact on rural Ireland and will affect women's lives differently to men's. To ensure that our climate action policies are fair and effective for women, decision-makers need to take account of the issues that affect women in rural areas. This must include:

- a gender equality analysis of climate change mitigation and adaptations policies,
- investment in a Just Transition plan for rural development, and
- prioritising worst-performing buildings and those occupied by low-income, vulnerable and energy poor households in all types of housing tenures as part of the National Retrofit Plan.

## 6. Decent standard of living

### Tackle poverty and provide a decent income

Tackling poverty and addressing the high cost of living in rural Ireland can be achieved by linking social welfare payments to average earnings and wages. This would mean that welfare increases would keep track with increases elsewhere in the economy. Many women work in sectors characterised by low paid and precarious work. Women in rural Ireland will also benefit particularly from cost of living measures including:

- investing in public services such as health, transport, broadband and care,
- investing in a State pension for everyone,
- increasing the national minimum wage as a step to achieving the living wage,
- providing supports for lone parents, and
- providing flexible opportunities for women in rural communities so they have greater access to quality training, education and employment.

## 7. Ending violence against women

### Ensure a zero-tolerance approach to violence against women in all rural communities

We must work towards an island of Ireland where women are safe and a zero-tolerance approach to violence against women is adopted. This must include the full implementation of the Istanbul Convention which sets out a blueprint for tackling all forms of gender-based violence. For women in rural Ireland, it will be particularly important that:

- violence against women is specifically named and addressed in our rural development policies,
- enough refuge spaces for women fleeing from abuse and violence are provided, and
- there is strong regional coordination under the Third National Strategy on violence against women to oversee delivery of services on the ground.

## 9. Community Sector

### Recognise the important role of the women's community sector for women in rural communities

The women's community sector plays an important role in addressing poverty and inequalities in rural areas. We must increase funding to the women's community sector and ensure the sector can:

- deliver community and adult education programmes,
- build capacity at community level for meaningful engagement and participation in climate justice, and
- empower women to participate in civil society at a local level.

This funding should be:

- independent,
- available year on year (for more than 12 months), and
- provided at a local level.

## 8. Political Life

### Increase women's political representation

Women in rural communities must be part of our political decision making at local level. Before the 2024 local elections, we must adopt new local quotas legislation which would mandate all political parties to run at least 40% women candidates. Quotas help to:

- make politics more democratic,
- make the nomination and selection process more transparent, and
- create more equal representation of women in political life.

## 10. Agriculture

### Recognise and support women's work in agriculture

Women are central to the future of agriculture. We must recognise and support women's work in agriculture through:

- supporting their participation on agribusiness and co-operative decision-making bodies,
- addressing succession and inheritance barriers for women, and
- promoting joint partnership initiatives.



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