



NWCI Opening Statement to Budgetary Oversight Committee Gender Budgeting Pilot Initiative

A Chathaoirleach and members of the committee,

Thank you for the invitation to appear before the Committee and the opportunity to comment on the Equality Budgeting initiative led by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DEPR) and undertaken by six other departments.

I understand that all in all you have had three NWCI documents shared with you over recent months: our substantive report setting out a proposed framework for gender budgeting in Ireland, a briefing document focusing specifically on what form the government pilot project should take and an instructional tool setting out gender assessment mechanisms that could be adopted in ex-ante and ex-post analyses with illustrative examples applied to some Budget 2018 measures. This final document was presented to high level officials in a briefing supported by DEPR last year.

I'm aware that DEPR appeared before you last week and has given you an overview of its broad approach and priorities. I will, therefore, not repeat those and move directly to the task requested of us by the Chair, namely to provide an assessment of the pilot initiative. DEPR has informed you that it had consulted with NWCI and IHREC during its process of developing that initiative and we wish to commend Mr. Beausang, Ms. Swaine and their colleagues for their efforts to do so. I'll take this opportunity too to welcome the initiative shown by the six departments who have committed to engage in the pilot process.

As you'll be aware the government, in its working paper committed to prioritising gender as its initial equality focus area in accordance with broad international precedence and due to the relatively wide availability of data.

Departments were, in the first instance, asked to review and assess policies for impact on gender equality and set high level gender equality objectives and indicators at programme level.

Much of the work to assess policies and set high level gender equality objectives within departments was, in fact, done for the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020. Some departments have done the work to identify specific needs of men relevant to their portfolios. The Department of Health has, for example, identified gender-specific objectives in its Men's Health Action Plan. Departments were therefore advised to begin by looking to the commitments they made in the national women's strategy in identifying their goals and objectives. This strategy can be viewed, by-and-large, as a compilation of existing policy commitments already agreed within departments.

Departments were then asked to report on gender equality budgetary objectives and targets in the Revised Estimates Volume. In first considering the identified objectives, some could be described as underwhelming. It is important, however, to take into account the period of time departments' had to prepare for the REV, the limited training to date made available to relevant officials, the absence of gender expertise within departments and, as referred to by Mr. Beausang last week, international lessons recommending specificity in the pilot stage. Though close monitoring and critical reflection is essential to the effective implementation of gender budgeting, we must also accept that this will necessarily be a long-term process. Departments must therefore have the opportunity to scope out how best to utilise the tools made available to them and how to concretely apply them. Genuine commitment will be needed to ex-ante as well as ex-post analysis, for example. I would therefore not be overly inclined to criticise the policy decisions evident in the REV at this point, but rather look at how departments are armed to achieve at least the goals they have set.

In saying this, it is clear that some of the objectives identified are not ambitious and, indeed, do not adhere to the prescribed approach of the pilot to focus on gender equality. As discussed in last week's Committee meeting with DEPR, the health goal, for example, is extremely limited when considered in the broad context of health inequalities and, indeed, gendered health inequalities. While the consideration of age-related and socioeconomic inequalities is to be welcomed, the metrics disappointingly do not include sex-disaggregated data, which is available to the department in this area. This is particularly concerning given that, according to 2017 research commissioned by the Marie Keating Foundation and pharmaceutical company MSD, lung cancer has now replaced breast cancer as the leading cause of cancer fatalities among women in Ireland. Indeed, lung cancer rates among women are expected to increase by 136 per cent by 2040.

To ensure an ambitious process of change, experts have emphasised the importance of maintaining an open process that allows for input and influence from outside government administration and of providing for a coordination structure that can provide critical input and feedback. They have cautioned that gender budgeting processes led solely by the public administration system tend to keep ambitions lower and focus on changes that are easily obtained. In this regard, DPER's proposal to establish a steering group involving NWCI and other external expert actors is to be welcomed. Individual departments must also be encouraged to provide for public participation in setting equality objectives. And, of course, this and select committee's oversight roles will be vital.

The availability of data is clearly critical. Our understanding is that, as part of this pilot process, DEPR has requested that departments identify and log where data deficiencies exist. We are not aware if a system has been put in place to assist departments in this regard or to compile this information. This will be crucial in informing the successful roll-out of gender budgeting in the long term. In June 2017, the Scottish Government published 'Scotland's Equality Evidence Strategy' aiming to identify the key research and evidence gaps for each protected characteristic and assigning responsibility for closing those gaps. In 2008 Israel, amended its statistics law to require collection of gender disaggregated data.

Progress on the REV equality objectives are to be reported in the Public Service Performance Report. For gender budgeting to be effective, the quality of data indicators and analysis will be critical. While, for example, the high level goal set by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is clearly ambitious, it identified only one gender-specific indicator. In order to fully assess the impact of childcare expenditure on gender equality, in the medium to long term, qualitative as well as quantitative analysis will be required. This will necessitate gender expertise as well as economic and budgetary expertise, specialised body of knowledge which is currently lacking within most departments. In the first instance, the newly established Parliamentary Budget Office could recruit in gender expertise to provide for adequate analysis and develop guidelines for implementation.

Finally, creating the appropriate context for these pilots remains imperative. An administratively-led process is useful to address micro-level and single-policy economic matters. It is easy, however, to lose sight of macroeconomic policies, in particular fiscal policy. The question of overall fiscal policies and the fiscal space remains crucial to equality in Irish society. One means by which government can appropriately guide departments in their gender budgeting efforts and provide clear indication of their macro-level priorities vis-à-vis equality is to publish an Equality Budget Statement alongside Budget 2019. In the medium term the government should consider creating a legal foundation for gender budgeting, building upon the existing Public Sector Duty requirements.