



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

FILL THE GAP



Pre Budget 2017

Submission of the National
Women's Council of Ireland

September 2017



Introduction

Established in 1973, the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) is the leading national women's membership organisation in Ireland. NWCI seeks full equality between men and women and we draw our mandate from a membership of over 190 groups and organisations across a diversity of backgrounds, sectors and locations. We also have a growing, committed individual membership.

Budget 2017 provides an opportunity for the new Government to develop its new budgetary process and place women and equality at the centre of decision making with regard to the distribution and redistribution of resources for 2017.



Context and Choices

Recent years have seen some recovery in the Irish economy with increased growth and a reduction in unemployment rates to 7.8%. Yet worrying deprivation levels, a doubling of consistent poverty rates from 4% to 8% and abnormally high income inequality remain serious concerns.

Recession and austerity have had a disproportionate economic impact on women in Ireland. The Gender Pay Gap has widened from 12.6% to 14.4% while the Gender Pension Gap has widened from 35 to 37%. ESRI research has shown that women in couples suffered a 14% loss in income during the recession compared to 9% for men.¹ A majority of low paid part time workers are women. Already vulnerable groups have suffered some of the worst impacts with 58% of lone parents, mostly women, experiencing deprivation.

NWCI welcomes the recognition in the Programme for Partnership Government (PPFG) that "economic repair must now be complemented by social repair". We also welcome the commitment to devoting two thirds of budgetary spend on public investment versus one third on tax measures. This comes after too many years of a deep imbalance in the other direction. Priority must now be given to reversing unsustainable cutbacks, investing in services and staff, repairing our social fabric and delivering the solid groundwork needed for a more equal and sustainable future, including an affordable, accessible childcare system.

Budget 2017 provides an opportunity to deliver tangible results for the current and future generations of citizens who rely on our shared public services and social infrastructure. NWCI is prioritising in Budget 2017 investment in early years and out of school childcare, violence against women and health services for women.

Developments such as Brexit contribute to a reduction in fiscal space, proposed tax reductions should be set aside in favour of the urgent task at hand to rebuild our public services.

NWCI believes that tax concessions do not represent a strategic use of hard earned public funds. In addition, given the job of repair required, we cannot afford to continue inequitable marginal rate tax reliefs which benefit the wealthiest.

CSO figures from recent years tell us that half of all households in Ireland would be at risk of poverty were it not for social transfers. We all rely on the social protection system at different points across our life cycle. While there has been a stronger focus on employment activation in recent years, social protection also plays a crucial role for the many thousands of citizens not 'of working age', those with limited capacity due to a disability and crucially those whose unpaid care contributes so much to our society and economy.

NWCI believes the best way to improve take home incomes is to do so at source by raising wages and taking action against precarious, low paid work. Decent work for decent pay not only puts more money back into the local economy right across the country, it also eases pressure on the social protection system.

The recommendations set out in our Pre Budget Submission focus on immediate priorities and payments which we believe must be addressed in Budget 2017, and also on the critical areas where we believe investment and research could pay long term dividends.



Embed Equality and Gender Proof the Budget

NWCI believes that a more equal society is not an aspirational idea which might eventually be achieved through the overspill of a 'trickle down' economy, rather it is the core foundation upon which any sustainable economy must be built. We have long argued that indicators such as deprivation levels, risk of poverty and the gender pay gap are the real tests of economic policy.

NWCI therefore strongly welcomes the PFBG commitment to equality and gender proof the budget process. We believe that these new mechanisms must be meaningfully developed and delivered. The involvement of women in the Scottish Budget Advisory Group has, for example, been crucial to the success of equality budgeting in Scotland. Scotland also produces an annual Budget Equality Statement and NWCI believes Ireland should produce a similar statement to accompany Budget 2017 as a step towards full equality and gender proofing in 2018.

NWCI is also recommending the designation of a specific budget line for implementation of the new Public Duty on Equality and Human Rights and conducting a full Departmental Gender Audit. Such a budget line could also support the implementation of the new Sustainable Development Goal indicators and targets for gender equality in Ireland.

It is crucial that established and longstanding commitments, too often left aside during the recession, are not again forgotten in the recovery. These include our Commitments under Europe 2020, The National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) and The National Women's Strategy.

Recommendations

- *Embedding of gender and equality proofing in the new Budget process, with a strong role for civil society.*
- *As first step, an 'Equality Statement' should accompany Budget 2017, as is done in Scotland.*



Strengthen Economic Independence

Over recent years our Social Protection system has introduced significant change in relation to employment activation. However, it unfortunately failed to challenge many of the embedded assumptions which lead to gender inequality. The 'all or nothing' approach which demands full-time availability and a strong emphasis on mandatory over voluntary activation have taken a serious toll on economic independence and access to opportunity for many women.

Ireland has thousands of Qualified Adults who are not only distant from the labour market but from the social protection system itself, 90% of them are women. Some are in what is described as 'jobless households' yet they cannot access training or supports without committing to full time availability.

DSP should ensure that in 2017 it reaches out and engages these women in their own right. It is crucial however that people be invited rather than compelled. As highlighted in NWC's publication 'Careless to Careful Activation', positive supports are far more effective than sanctions in bringing people into sustainable employment and recognition of care responsibilities is also crucial.

In addition to the care-credit or re-entry credit discussed elsewhere in this submission, DSP might consider widening access to the Job Seekers Transitional Payment. Development of a wider range of quality part time education, training and employment opportunities is also crucial, as is access to childcare supports.

The principles of voluntary engagement and support rather than sanction are also crucial in relation to any activation initiatives designed for people with a disability.

One positive measure for women's economic independence is the recently transposed EU directive requiring family business owners to pay PRSI for a contributing spouse. However, DSP should work with Revenue to raise public awareness of this obligation and the opportunities it might open up.

Recommendations

- *End the limitation rule and promote administrative Individualisation at first point of contact.*
- *Deliver Homemakers Credit, retrospective to 1973, and initiate research into a modern Care Credit system. Ensure this also serves as a Re-Entry credit.*
- *Develop options for extension of Jobseekers Transitional payment to Qualified Adults and other groups who may have partial availability.*
- *Actively invite women into the system and widen voluntary access to high-quality activation opportunities to Qualified Adults and others outside the Live Register.*
- *Develop and pilot a wider range of quality part time voluntary activation initiatives.*
- *Extend access to DSP childcare schemes to Qualified Adults.*
- *Ensure that all activation of parent caregivers remains voluntary, certainly until a comprehensive public childcare system is in place.*
- *Promote public awareness of new obligation to pay PRSI for spouses in family business.*



Invest in Families

Care always costs and it is usually women who absorb those costs, often in reduced incomes or loss of economic independence. Paternity Leave for fathers, to be delivered through DSP, is an important step forward in the recognition and sharing of care, the next step is a timeline for paid Parental Leave. Partial restoration of Child Benefit over the last two years has also been widely welcomed and must be sustained. Habitual Residency should be removed as a condition for Child Benefit to ensure all children are supported.

Early years and out of school hours care must be recognised as essential social infrastructure, without which sustainable progress or gender equality cannot be achieved. Ireland still lags behind the rest of the world, investing less than half the OECD average in early years. Budget 2017 needs to scale up investment in publicly subsidised, affordable, accessible and quality early childhood education and care. Quality must include decent conditions for those working in this area, particularly in Community Childcare Facilities. Currently many ECCE workers are unemployed for 9 weeks of each year. With ECCE limited to 15 hours per week, most childcare workers do not qualify for Family Income Supplement. This also affects parents hoping to re-enter the workforce. Consultation with ECEC providers is critical to drive forward policy and the expansion of a programme of subsidisation to make childcare more available and affordable and to ensure that the true costs of childcare are reflected in the subsidies to providers.

Recommendations

- *Ensure effective rollout and public promotion of 2 weeks' Paternity Leave and initiate delivery of 6 months paid parental leave.*
- *Extend ECCE hours from 15 to 20 per week and increase support to childcare providers to ensure quality rollout of 2nd free pre-school year.*
- *Initiate a national subsidisation programme to reduce the costs of childcare to all families, to introduce a cap on childcare fees and to enable community crèches to provide free childcare to the most vulnerable families.*
- *Increase support for accessible and affordable out-of-school-hours childcare and Breakfast Clubs.*
- *Support community crèches to maintain ratios while CE workers are in continuous training.*
- *Investment in an agreed salary scale for Early Years workforce.*



Support One Parent Families

One in four households with children in Ireland are one parent families. Amongst these families 58% experience deprivation. Serious concern has been expressed right across civil society that the policy direction taken by DSP in recent years may exacerbate rather than relieve the difficulties faced by this already vulnerable group. An urgent review of overall policy in this area is needed in consultation with civil society and the families themselves. An audit should also be conducted into the economic and social impacts of the transition of thousands of women out of One Parent Family Payment (OFP) over the last two years.

In the short term, Income Disregard (ID) should be fully restored for those on OFP and voluntary access to Intreo schemes increased. Women on Job Seekers Transition and working should have access to ID or FIS and those in education should qualify for SUSI grants. Lone Parents on JA must be supported and their caring role recognised.

Recommendations

- Reverse cuts to Income Disregard and ensure access to ID or FIS for lone parents on JST.
- Introduce specific measures to support lone parents on JA with child under 18.
- Ensure lone parents on JST have access to SUSI grant for duration of course.
- Make reducing deprivation and child poverty levels in one parent families a priority in Budget 2017.



Value Our Young People

Recent years have seen the loss of hundreds of thousands of Ireland's young people to emigration and a steady majority of emigrants under 24 years old have been women. NWCi believes that payment cuts, precarious work and the loss of entry level jobs to internship culture are potential drivers of emigration and would like to see DSP deliver strong gender sensitive research into this question.

Reduced rate payments for under 25's must be reviewed and restored. The ending of JobBridge is to be welcomed as it was open to exploitation and contributed to a culture of low or no pay work for young people. However new quality initiatives must now be resourced and introduced, with proper attention to gender proofing. It is regrettable that high quality initiatives such as those developed in Ballymun as part of the European Youth Guarantee have faced insecurity over funding when they should instead be seen as central to the scaling up and spreading out of good practice. The next stage of the European Youth Guarantee should emphasise quality and options for all young people, including those not on Jobseeker's Allowance and it would also be positive to see tailored initiatives rolled out for young people in rural areas.

It is important to recognise that many young people who may not be working are still actively contributing by participating in their communities and some may even be carers. Special supports should be targeted to young carers to help them balance that care with their own development.

Recommendations

- *Allocate additional public resources to extension of EYG (rather than reroute existing resources).*
- *Review and Restore Jobseekers Allowance for under 25's, beginning with full payment for those on employment, education or training schemes.*
- *Fund research into possible drivers of emigration including payment cuts/precarious work.*
- *Extend Free Travel Scheme to include young people in receipt of Domiciliary Care Allowance.*
- *Increase hours carers can study/work while receiving social welfare from 15 to 18.5 hours a week.*



Deliver Decent Work

Ireland's Gender Pay Gap has widened from 12.6 % to 14.4% in recent years. Sectors where women have been at the frontline of aggressive casualisation have seen the erosion of pay and security. CSO figures tell us that in 2014 50% of women workers earned €20,000 or less. These concerns have been reflected in research commissioned by the previous Government from the University of Limerick and in the reports of the Low Pay Commission (LPC). It is notable and welcome that the PFPG has committed to strengthening the LPC "to reflect in-work poverty and the gender pay gap". An important LPC report into the specific issues faced by women in low pay is due for publication in November, and resources should be allocated in Budget 2017 to ensure DSP has the flexibility to respond to any recommendations that emerge.

DSP should also ensure that the PFPG commitment to an LPC focus on unacceptably levels of in-work poverty is not lost or forgotten. Precarious work and low pay not only place a huge pressure on individuals, they also place pressure on our social protection system. With workers currently making up a shocking 18% of adults at risk of poverty, there and is no doubt that without social transfers and in-work payments such as FIS, many households would not be able to cope.

It is important that workers facing unpredictable schedules are not penalised by the social protection system and payment structures and rules need to recognise that for many individuals, structuring or increasing the days or hours worked is not in their control. It is also important however that the system does not reward companies engaging in negative practice. Stronger scrutiny should be attached to the companies seeking to benefit from DSP employer incentive schemes. DSP should also seek the attachment of strong social clauses and employment standards to all public spending arising from Budget 2017. Where public monies are spent on procurement, grants or investment it should come with an expectation of decent work.

A more active role is required to tackle the underlying problem of low pay and precarious work by demanding that adequate resources are allocated to implement the recommendations of the University of Limerick in relation to regulation of practices such as 'if and when' contracts.

Recommendations

- Gender proof any new activation initiatives and review their impact before scaling up.
- Increase in Minimum Wage to €11.50 per hour and promote 'Living Wage' through policy and practise.
- Ensure no-one is required to accept insecure, non-fixed hour jobs as 'reasonable offer of work'.
- Recognise atypical work patterns by calculating unemployment on hours rather than days per week.
- Maintain or increase in-work income supports such as Family Income Supplement (FIS).
- Increase the earnings threshold for access to FIS and review the hours threshold.
- Drive Cross-Departmental cooperation to promote 'Living Wage' through policy and practice.
- Designate DSP resources for 2017 to respond to Low Pay Commission's pending report on women.
- Attach social criteria, clauses and conditionality to Employer Incentive Schemes.
- Demand attachment of strong employment standards and social criteria to all Public Spending arising from Budget 2017 including procurement, grants and investment.



Close the Gender Pension Gap

Ireland's Gender Pension Gap has recently widened further to 37% and the PFPG has rightly identified closing of that gap as a priority. NWCI is very keen to be partners in the delivery of that goal, having previously published substantial research and made detailed submissions on this subject. NWCI believes a Universal Pension is the best way to support equality in older age and progress towards this goal must be initiated in 2017. In the interim, there are gaps and inequities in the first tier of our pension system which need urgent attention. This job of repair must, we believe, be given greater priority than the introduction of any new or supplementary tier.

Currently, 84% of those receiving a full State Contributory Pension are men, and while this payment was protected during the recession, the Reduced Rate payments, on which a majority of women rely, have been steadily eroded. The fact that only 16% of women receive the full contributory rate reflects both the legacy of the marriage bar and a system poorly designed to support individual entitlement or recognise care. Rather than address these inequalities, we have allowed them to deepen in recent years by increasing contributory thresholds and even making it harder to purchase voluntary credits.

A key priority for Budget 2017 must be the long overdue delivery of 'Homemaker's Credit' or 'Care Credit', applicable for up to ten years and applied retrospectively to 1973. This practical recognition of the social and economic contribution of care should also serve as a Re-Entry Credit, ensuring that those looking to re-enter the workforce after a period spent caring can access training, educational or employment supports from their local Intreo office.

Budget 2017 should decisively end Marginal Rate Tax reliefs on Private Pensions as they have been shown to be ineffective and inequitable, with disproportionate benefit for higher earners. As women tend to be lower earners, these tax reliefs also widen rather than narrow the gender pension gap. The public monies saved should be redirected into the public pension system.

Recommendations

- *Prioritise the narrowing of the Gender Pension Gap in pension policy development during 2017.*
- *Resource open public consultation on a 'Universal Pension'.*
- *Prioritise correction of the gaps and gender inequalities in First Tier Pension system over development of any supplementary system.*
- *Introduce promised Homemakers Credit, backdated to 1973. Initiate Research into a modern care credit system, based on best international practice.*
- *Make special provision within Care Credit system to ensure lifetime carers (those caring in excess of 20 years) are entitled to a fair Contributory State Pension when they reach retirement age.*
- *Ensure Homemaker's or Care Credit also serve as Re-Entry Credit, facilitating access to employment, training and education supports.*
- *Conduct Gender Impact Assessment on changes to Contributory Pension and Voluntary Contributions and reverse cuts to lower bands of Reduced Rate Contributory State Pension.*
- *Facilitate easier access to voluntary contributions.*



Review and Restore Core Payments and Supports

NWCI believes Budget 2017 is an opportunity to review and restore payment levels for those relying on Social Protection, in line with the restoration of movement in other areas of the economy and recognising the disproportionate impact which the recession has had on those on lower incomes. Moreover, in addition to a rising cost of living, many households are facing an increase indirect charges which further erode their financial resources.

The first priority must be the restoration for those who experienced a cut in payments, including the reduced rate contributory pension and payments for those under 26. However, with recent research from Social Justice Ireland highlighting that many of those relying on Social Protection payments are now below the poverty threshold, it may now be time for an incremental increase across all payments. Benchmarking and a link to Minimum Essential Standards of Living (MESL) should also be considered.

Almost 20% of children currently live in households where incomes are below the poverty line. Far too many families currently live in Direct Provision. While NWCI ultimately seeks the abolition of this shameful system, Budget 2017 must certainly deliver a significant increase in the paltry weekly adult payment.

Recommendations

- *Review Current Payment levels and plan for restoration or incremental increase.*
- *Consider benchmarking of payments and stronger link to MESL.*
- *Begin restoration of Reduced Rate Pensions and Jobseekers Allowance for those under 26.*
- *Increase Carer's Allowance and Carer's Benefit towards 2009 rates of €220.50 and €221.*
- *Reinstate in full the Household Benefits Package, including the telephone allowance.*
- *Maintain or increase current rates of Fuel Allowance.*
- *Disregard the Half-Rate Carer's Allowance in the assessment of means for Fuel Allowance.*
- *Ensure retention of three-year Medical card for those transitioning to employment.*
- *Remove Habitual Residency Condition as a condition for access for Child Benefit.*
- *Increase weekly payments for both adults and children in Direct Provision in Budget 2017.*



Focusing on Women's Health

Many NWCI members have communicated the devastating impact of cutbacks and austerity on our health services and the need for renewed investment to ensure women's health needs are being met. There are opportunities for new, more effective approaches to health services for women and men which should be placed at the heart of health reform and inform the long term vision for healthcare over a 10 year period that the Government has committed to developing this year.

Pilots conducted by NWCI and the HSE confirm that gender sensitive health policies and services deliver better outcomes for both men and women. Gender proofing our health services helps the Department of Health and HSE to meet their legal obligations under the new Public Sector Duty to promote Equality and Human Rights and assist in eliminating health inequalities, one of the priority objectives of Healthy Ireland, as well as meeting commitments to equality proof budgets and policies as per A Programme for a Partnership Government 2016. Resources should now be allocated to roll out gender mainstreaming on a far larger scale across all areas of health provision.

NWCI welcomed the publication of the National Maternity Strategy in January 2016 in particular the focus on more midwife led services in local communities to facilitate choice and continuity of care for women. This can only happen with considerable investment for the implementation of the Strategy, in particular the recruitment of more midwives. This should be a top priority for Budget 2017.

Links have been shown between persistent gender inequalities and smoking for women.² NWCI supports the Irish Cancer Society (ICS) call for more investment in community based smoking cessation services such as the ICS We Can Quit project which is specifically targeted at women in areas where smoking prevalence is high. At present NRT has to be paid for by the user, unless they have a medical card, and evidence from Ireland shows that this is a barrier to potential quitters trying to access it. The HSE currently spends around €12 million per year on NRT for medical card holders and in the interest of progression towards universal healthcare, consideration must be given to extending this to all smokers either through prescription or by signing up to a smoking cessation programme. These moves would significantly help make Ireland tobacco free by 2025.

The availability of high-quality population based screening is one of the strongest weapons we can use to reduce the high breast cancer death rate in Ireland - in 2008 Ireland had the fourth highest mortality rate for breast cancer in Europe. Women who are 60-69 years old have the second highest incidence of breast cancer and the second highest risk of dying from it. 1 in 10 incidences of breast cancer occur in women aged 65-69 years old. It is critical that women in the 65-69 age bracket are all screened as soon as possible. NWCI welcomes the commitment in the Programme for Government 2016 to extend BreastCheck and this needs to be delivered on as soon as possible.

Despite the evidence³ that Travellers experience the worst health status in Ireland, Traveller health is not a priority among health planners. The government adopts a standardised approach which ignores disparities in health outcomes amongst communities who experience discrimination and disadvantage. For members of the Roma community, lack of financial resources or state support, combined with a lack of clear accessible information and a lack of trust all impact on engagement with health services.

Osteoporosis affects more women than men especially women over 50 as they can lose up to 30% of their overall bone density while going through the menopause. 1 in 2 women over 50 will break a bone due to osteoporosis, in comparison with 1 in 5 men over 50. This is a silent disease with no signs or symptoms and it is estimated that 280,000 people are undiagnosed at present. It cost the State 535 million to treat fractures in 2013. Prevention and early diagnosis by a DXA scan is cheaper than the treatment of fractures.⁴

It is estimated that more than 3,780 women and girls between the ages of 15 and 44 in Ireland have experienced FGM.⁵ A recently released study on FGM risk within the European Union has calculated that between 1 and 11% of girls in Ireland from FGM-practising countries may still be at risk of the procedure.⁶ The passing of the Criminal Justice (Female Genital Mutilation) Act 2012 was a very positive step towards eradicating FGM in Ireland. However, legislation alone is insufficient to ensure the abandonment of the practice. Immediate action is needed across departments to put in place proper measures of protection and prevention, as part of a comprehensive plan to safeguard women and girls.

Recommendations

- *Establish and resource a gender mainstreaming unit within the Department of Health to oversee and implement HSE Gender Mainstreaming Framework⁷ across the full complement of health services.*
- *Ringfence funding to implement the National Maternity Strategy including the recruitment of sufficient number of midwives to deliver on its vision.*
- *Provide resources for women centred smoking cessation programmes nationwide and make Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) free for all those in smoking cessation programmes, such as the Irish Cancer Society's We Can Quit project.*
- *Ensure adequate funds are provided in the HSE Services Plan 2017 to enable the roll out of BreastCheck to continue, and that the ringfencing of funding is maintained.*
- *Develop and fund a new National Traveller Health action plan to address the findings of the All Ireland Traveller Health Study and develop and fund a primary healthcare project with the Roma community to increase access to information on healthcare and uptake of services.*
- *Make DXA scans for osteoporosis widely available and free of charge.*
- *Allocate resources for the establishment of an inter-departmental committee on FGM which would be tasked with the role of drawing up a National Action Plan to combat FGM and maintain funding for the Irish Family Planning Association specialist treatment service for women who have experienced FGM.*



Tackle Violence Against Women

Domestic and sexual violence is a major problem in Ireland and should be a priority for this Government. Research from the EU Fundamental Rights Agency found that 1 in 4 women experience physical and sexual violence from a male partner.⁸ Alongside the personal and social impacts of such violence, there is also an economic impact, with violence against women estimated by Women's Aid to cost €2.2 billion every year. Ireland's failure to adequately acknowledge or redress a legacy of institutional violence against women has been internationally recognised and criticised by the UN. Mr. Justice Quirke has made numerous recommendations for a Magdalene restorative justice scheme.⁹ Budget 2017 needs to send a strong national and international signal that we are dedicating the necessary resources to change the record on violence against women.

There are some welcome and positive developments to combat violence against women. NWCI welcomed the signing of the Istanbul Convention in November 2015 and the subsequent publication of the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence 2016-2021 as a roadmap to ratification of the Convention. This strategy will only make a real difference to the lives of women if there are sufficient funds to ensure effective implementation. Resources to ratify the Istanbul Convention must be allocated in Budget 2017, particularly with regard to prevention and prosecution.

A SAFE Ireland report launched in May estimates that as many as 4,000 women and children being accommodated on a yearly basis in emergency refuge accommodation are not being counted and recognised as being homeless.¹⁰ They have been left out of the homeless agenda.¹¹ Lack of capacity in emergency refuges is also a problem. According to Women's Aid Ireland has a total of 21 women's refuges with 141 family places. This figure only represents 31% of the places needed according to a Recommendation of the Council of Europe. The Action Plan for Housing has stated that Tusla will provide additional emergency refuge accommodation spaces for victims of domestic violence.¹²

Recommendations

- Provide adequate resources to ensure full implementation of the commitments contained in the recently published Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence and move towards ratification of Istanbul Convention in 2017.
- Restore funding for both frontline and policy organisations to at least pre-recession levels.
- Resource comprehensive research and data on the prevalence and extent of violence against women in Ireland.
- Allocate resources to Garda National Protective Services Bureau to ensure it effectively delivers its remit on violence against women, including training and for the establishment of specialist units at divisional level.
- Make available additional resources to the Garda National Protective Services Bureau to carry out an investigation into domestic homicides of women in order to identify risk and provide early intervention.
- Continue to fund annual government led awareness and prevention campaigns to create a zero tolerance message on violence against women while also providing funding for support organisations at local level to promote their services.
- Increase the emergency accommodation capacity of domestic violence services by 10% or by 14 family units every year for the next five years.¹³
- Implement Justice Quirke's 2013 restorative justice proposals and ensure women affected by institutional violence have access to entitlements and pensions. Reserve resources for further investigation into and redress of institutional violence against women in Ireland.
- Facilitate immediate switching of benefit entitlement when separation occurs due to domestic violence.
- Support women formerly registered as 'qualified adults' to quickly establish individual benefit claims with due sensitivity to difficulties around means testing when separation is due to violence.
- Provide flexibility on Rent Allowance levels to those transitioning from an abusive situation.
- Provide HRC exemption to women experiencing violence and direct Community Welfare Officers to grant essential support to those leaving abusive regardless of HRC status.



Supporting women's participation in Community Development, Local Development and Local Government

NWCI and our members have, throughout the recent period of austerity, consistently voiced concerns that significant cuts to funding sources and recent reforms to funding structures are contributing to a prolonged process of dismantling the sector. Core to this belief has been the replacement of grant-aided funding for community development groups and voluntary organisations with tendering processes that have forced projects to compete against each other to remain in operation, resulting in the destabilisation of the sector and undermining of communities' social, cultural and economic progress.

NWCI welcomes the Department's commitments in its draft Statement of Strategy 2015-2017 to 'promoting and supporting the development of communities and the community and voluntary sector' and to 'support a range of community and voluntary initiatives and programmes aimed at tackling social exclusion and facilitating community participation at all levels'. In order to effectively achieve this goal the Department must recognise that community development represents an integral, holistic, sustainable and effective approach to building and maintaining prospering communities, and that the needs of the community and the appropriate responses to those needs must be determined and assessed locally.

NWCI member Community Work Ireland has stated that its “central concern with regard to commissioning is that no matter what definition is adopted, programme design and target-setting is centrally determined. While this may be compatible with services that are focused on individual clients, it is incompatible with community work” and that “work to address poverty, social exclusion and inequality through community engagement or community development is not a service that can be commissioned”.

The community development sector, including local women’s community groups, should not be subject to commissioning processes that impose centrally pre-determined programmes and targets, but funded under specific grant agreements. NWCI commends the introduction of the Support Scheme for Women under the Department of Justice and Equality, under which the National Collective of Community-based Women’s Networks is funded, which could be expanded to support women’s community-based groups across the country.

NWCI further welcomes the Department’s stated intention in its draft strategy statement to ‘facilitate community engagement in the planning and delivery of local and community development policies at national and local levels through leading the development and implementation of a new Framework Policy for Local and Community Development’. NWCI’s response to the Department’s consultation on the draft framework policy raised concerns regarding the absence of any commitment to actively tackle gender inequality through the new local government reform process. Given their integral role in community life, local authorities, the new Local Community Development Committees, National Collective Community-Based Women’s Networks (NCCWN) organisations and other women’s community organisations are ideally placed to combat inequalities between women and men. They can, through their competences and through co-operation with the whole range of local actors, undertake concrete actions in favour of gender equality. Sufficient resources must be made available to women’s community organisations, such as NCCWN which represents 17 women’s projects nationally and has lost 38% of their funding which has not yet been restored. Equally, resources must be ringfenced to build capacity among local authority staff and members of Local Community Development Committees to develop policies and programmes that respond effectively to the particular needs of women and men.

Recommendations

- *Introduce a specific national multi-annual grant-aid scheme for women’s community organisations whose main target group are women experiencing disadvantage. This could be done through increasing the DJE Scheme to Support Women and expanding eligibility of this programme to women’s community-based groups across the country. Funding for NCCWN and other women’s community-based groups should be restored to pre-austerity levels.*
- *Actively embed social and gender equality clauses and conditions, as well as specific monitoring measures into all public spending contracts, including with the community and voluntary and local development sectors. Such clauses and conditions do not preclude the need for dedicated resources for programmes and supports targeted specifically at marginalised and disadvantaged women.*
- *Ring-fence resources for a nationally-coordinated comprehensive gender audit across local alignment structures and plans with a view to identifying and addressing capacity-building needs of local authority staff and members of LCDCs and Women’s Community Organisations.*



Supporting Women's Leadership

Support for women's voices at civil society level is another essential aspect of participatory democracy. The National Women's Council of Ireland is the representative organisation for over 190 diverse member groups from across the country and plays a vital, independent and unique role in promoting women's voices and perspectives. Despite funding cuts of 45%, NWCI membership has grown in recent years. However, a lack of resources have made it difficult to fully respond to the increasing demands and opportunities around gender equality. NWCI is seeking a full restoration of funding over the next two years.

Ireland continues to perform poorly in the European Gender Equality Index in terms of power and participation with women still underrepresented across many areas of decision-making from the board room to the Parliament.

Recommendations

- Fully restore funding for NWCI over the next two years.
- Fund a 'Women on Boards Review' to establish a baseline for improvement and an evidenced based plan of action.
- Resource a Gender Audit of the Oireachtas.

References:

- 1 ESRI (2014) <https://www.esri.ie/publications/gender-impact-of-tax-and-benefit-changes-a-microsimulation-approach/>
- 2 See Irish Cancer Society / NWCI: Women and Smoking – Time to face the Crisis. January 2013.
- 3 School of Public Health, UCD: All Ireland Traveller Health Study Our Geels (September 2010)
- 4 For more information on osteoporosis in Ireland see www.irishosteoporosis.ie
- 5 Akidwa / RCSI (2013) FGM: Information for Health Care Professionals Working in Ireland 2nd Edition
- 6 European Institute for Gender Equality (2015). Estimation of girls at risk of female genital mutilation in the European Union. Available at <http://eige.europa.eu/content/document/estimation-of-girls-at-risk-of-female-genital-mutilation-in-the-european-union-report>
- 7 NWCI / HSE: Equal but Different: A Framework for Integrating Gender Equality into HSE Policy, Planning and Service Delivery. November 2012. Available at www.nwci.ie
- 8 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights: Violence against Women: An EU Wide Survey (2014)
- 9 Report of Mr Justice John Quirke on the establishment of an ex gratia Scheme and related matters for the benefit of those women who were admitted to and worked in the Magdalen Laundries, May 2013. Available at: <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/THE%20Quirke%20report.pdf/Files/THE%20Quirke%20report.pdf>
- 10 Safe Ireland: The State we are in 2016. Available at www.safeireland.ie
- 11 See also Sonas Domestic Violence Charity: Submission to the Oireachtas Committee on Housing and Homelessness 11 May 2016. www.domesticabuse.ie
- 12 Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness (July 2016) available at www.rebuildingireland.ie
- 13 NWCI endorse this recommendation from Safe Ireland in its report The State We Are in 2016, available at www.safeireland.ie



National Women's Council of Ireland
100 North King Street, Dublin 7

Phone: (01) 6790 100 | **Fax:** (01) 604 0345 | **www.nwci.ie**

 www.twitter.com/nwci  www.facebook.com/NationalWomensCouncilofIreland/