

Time to act for women's rights and equality

2025
—2029



National Women's Council

Acknowledgements

The National Women's Council (NWC) wishes to sincerely thank and acknowledge Kathleen O'Meara as the consultant who worked with us to develop this Strategic Plan.

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We also wish to thank the people who agreed to be interviewed in this process for their insights and perspectives on NWC and for challenging us to be ambitious.

We want to sincerely thank the NWC members who contributed their views and perspectives through surveys, focus groups and meetings on many occasions over the past year, and the NWC Board members who voluntarily and consistently give their breadth of expertise and valuable direction to lead the organisation.

We sincerely acknowledge the staff team for their skills, commitment and passion in the development of this new Strategic Plan.



Foreword

This Strategic Plan, 'Time to Act for Women's Rights and Equality' provides the National Women's Council (NWC) with the ambition, values and actions necessary to drive equality for women over the next five years. The Plan builds on our learning and experiences.

NWC has been at the forefront of change for women in Ireland, leading many campaigns, holding Government to account and working collaboratively across civil society to place the experiences of women and the inequalities they face at the centre. The stark reality is that women and girls continue to experience significant inequalities across all facets of society, with marginalised groups facing even greater barriers. We must take decisive action at every opportunity to tackle these systemic inequalities and fully realise the rights of women's and girls in all our diversity.

This Strategic Plan brings a renewed sense of urgency for transformative change and enables NWC to mobilise and campaign for women's rights and equality as an inclusive and intersectional organisation. We want to transform society so no woman experiences poverty, racism, violence, discrimination or exclusion, and all women can realise their full economic, social and political rights. The shared ownership and consensus embedded in this plan provides NWC with a strong mandate to work with our members and our allies to advocate against discrimination and exclusion and to insist on a faster pace of change for women across the island.

We will stand firm in the current challenging global context to both protect and advance women's rights and equality. A feminist future across the island means ensuring women's voices and experiences are at the heart of our decision making and at the centre of protecting and caring for our planet for future generations.

As Chairperson and Director of NWC we are passionate and committed to drive the ambitions of this plan and we value this opportunity to work with our members, friends and all those who want a more equal society for women. It is time to act for women's rights and equality and guided by this Plan NWC will lead and be a catalyst for change.



Jennifer Okeke,
Chairperson, NWC



Orla O'Connor,
Director, NWC

The National Women's Council (NWC) is the leading representative organisation working for women's rights and equality across the island of Ireland, founded in 1973.

We are rooted in our membership. We work together with our almost 200 member groups across the island of Ireland and a growing community of individual supporters to deliver on our purpose – to achieve women's rights and equality.

We are a feminist organisation. We define feminism as a movement striving for the social, cultural, political, and economic equality of women and men. This involves challenging gender inequalities and the systems and structures that oppress women. It also involves mobilising our members and advocating for true equality for all women and girls. Feminism is a core value for us, guiding our actions to achieve our goal of women's rights and equality.

We are funded both from grants from Government, the largest being the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, from state agencies including HSE and Pobal, from fundraising and from our members and individual supporters.

Our work is for women and girls in all their diversity.

Our role is

- to stand firm and advance women's rights and equality;
- to promote a feminist analysis and solutions;
- to inform, set the agenda, empower and campaign for women's rights and equality;
- to represent and speak up on issues important to our members, and
- to listen deeply and create spaces for women to be heard.

Methodology

In November 2024, NWC appointed Kathleen O'Meara, consultant, to work with the Board, staff and membership to develop a new Strategic Plan.

Kathleen used the Appreciative Inquiry methodology as the key tool in the development of the Plan. This approach uses the strengths of the organisation as its fundamental building block. Through creative engagement and enquiry, the process itself generates self-determined change and helps the organisation to move towards a shared vision of the future and the actions needed to make it happen.

Building on the outputs of a review of the previous Strategic Plan, Kathleen facilitated a series of Appreciative Inquiry sessions and workshops with a core group comprised of Board, staff and Critical Friends to design the foundational statements of the Plan. A survey of members and a series of interviews with external stakeholders also informed the development of the Plan. A review of relevant documents and reports fed into the landscape analysis. In-person and online engagement with Board, staff, and members agreed a set of Strategic Goals as the basis for the actions to be taken to give expression to NWC's vision and mission.





#FeministClimateJustice

feminist communities
for climate justice

This Strategic Plan builds on the work of previous Plans and the achievements of NWC in recent years.

There were many achievements.

Here are some examples:

- We prioritised violence against women and partnered with Government to develop the Third National Strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence which led directly to the establishment of CUAN, the Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-Based Violence (DSGBV) Agency in Ireland. We also achieved with our members the recognition of prostitution as a form of sexual violence.
- Our campaigning led to the elevation of the need to provide public early childhood education and care to national level. NWC changed the narrative and discourse to significantly increase public awareness and understanding of public childcare as a realistic solution to the childcare crisis. This led to concrete commitments in the Programme for Government.
- We kept women's reproductive health high on the agenda, resulting in the rollout of free contraception, a commitment to free HRT, and campaigned for the review of the 2018 abortion legislation and the promotion of gender sensitive mental health services.
- Since 2020, NWC has played a pivotal role in enhancing cross-border collaboration amongst women's organisations, and promoting women's representation in public life, in peacebuilding and civic society.
- NWC led out on the issue of feminist climate justice and has put it firmly on the public policy agenda.

Challenges ahead

In the next four years, NWC will navigate a landscape which has been upended in an unprecedented way across the world. The political energy, globally, has moved to the right, with a significant shift in the political and social landscape. The rise of far-right movements, a worsening climate emergency and a growing backlash against gender equality now pose a significant and urgent risk to women's rights.

We are also witnessing increased levels of war and active conflict in Europe and globally and a growing discourse focused on the need to prioritise investment in questions of 'security' and 'defence'.

A trade war between the US and the EU poses a risk to Ireland's economic prosperity and could have a severe impact on low paid and precarious employment, where women are overrepresented, and threaten social spending. The pay gap remains high at 10%, the pension gap at 35%, influenced by factors such as the dominance of women in some professions like care, and in unpaid care responsibilities, and continues to hinder economic equality. The ongoing cost of living crisis continues to disproportionately impact women and girls in Ireland, deepening gender inequalities and placing additional financial pressure on those already at risk of poverty.

Politically, the representation deficit remains: despite progress, in the Republic of Ireland only 25% of parliamentary seats are held by women, the lowest in Western Europe. This underrepresentation poses a significant barrier to achieving gender-balanced decision-making.

Socially and technologically, the use of social media to spread online hate and misogyny, has moved up the agenda, and the negative impact it is having on how boys and young men relate to their world, and conduct their relationships, has moved centre stage for attention. Nor can it be considered without assessing the threat posed to girls and women; it has become an issue needing a response at the highest level.

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) has grown exponentially and has become part of the technological landscape in a significant way, creating opportunities for innovation and breakthroughs in industry and medicine, for example. However, the risks posed to women's online safety, to job security, and to the environment by a lack of a strong regulatory framework are so extensive that they are difficult to comprehend. AI will impact our work in ways we can currently only imagine.

The absence of harmonised policies and services for women North and South presents many challenges for women moving between jurisdictions in accessing services such as early years education and care, housing and health. Barriers particularly affect women seeking protection from domestic abuse and intimate partner violence and migrant women working and living on the island.

Opportunities to stand firm and grow

The Government's commitment to publishing and implementing an updated National Strategy for Women and Girls presents an avenue for NWC to influence policies addressing persistent gender inequalities. Full and effective implementation of the Strategy — with meaningful involvement of women and women's groups — will be critical to delivering real change.

There will be a new Government strategy on violence against women during the lifetime of the Government – an opportunity to press for a greater realisation of a zero tolerance and survivor centred approach, increased resources and stronger policies. In the North, the new Violence Against Women Strategy presents a similar opportunity. However, it requires dedicated resourcing for frontline services and State commitment for full implementation. Tackling violence against women from an all island approach has the potential to make Ireland a place for all women to live safely and free from the threat of violence and exploitation.

Ireland will hold the presidency of the European Union in 2026, creating a platform for NWC to hold the Government to account in advancing women's rights. NWC can use this opportunity to amplify issues such as gender mainstreaming in policy development, funding for women-focused initiatives, and the protection of reproductive rights across the EU.

In mid-2025, Ireland will undergo review under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The concluding observations from this process will provide a crucial tool to hold the State accountable for progress on women's rights and gender equality. Additional international reporting processes over the lifetime of this strategy will also offer opportunities to highlight the ongoing challenges faced by women and girls in all their diversity. The introduction of mandatory gender pay gap reporting for organisations with over 50 employees by 2025 offers a platform for NWC to advocate for transparency and equitable pay practices. Additionally, broader EU legislative efforts continue to shape the landscape for gender equality, offering further avenues for campaigns in areas such as workplace rights, work-life balance, and protections against gender-based discrimination.

NWC members across the country are engaging in local mobilisations against the rise of racism and hate, in a positive and empowered way. Civil society and feminist groups are co-operating in positive and progressive ways, standing firm and growing the spaces for inclusion, diversity and hope.

Climate change is a crisis of social justice. Current policy approaches to climate action often deepen existing inequalities disproportionately affecting women and marginalised communities due to structural injustices that limit their access to resources, decision making, and safety.

NWC will champion policies that integrate gender perspectives into climate action, pushing for recognition that care work is green work, gender sensitive natural disaster response planning, and sustainable development practices that promote equality.

Conversations about the constitutional future of our island have accelerated in recent years and it is vital that women's voices and experiences are integral to those discussions. The all-island work which NWC has been engaged in will continue, creating further opportunities to enhance relationships across the island of Ireland, foster reconciliation, and continue in a leadership role to grow a feminist network across the island of Ireland.



We know there are many urgent and important issues and concerns for women and girls. We also know that in order for our work to be effective, we need to prioritise. This means knowing and building on our strengths and focusing on the issues and campaigns where our voice can add real value and have impact.

Using a collaborative strategic approach and working in partnership with our members and allies will be essential to realising the ambitions of our strategic plan. It will also involve assessing how we organise ourselves and trying out new approaches to be dynamic and robust in delivering our goals to advance women's rights and equality.

Our Vision is a feminist Ireland that is just and caring, where everyone thrives.

Our Mission is to lead transformative action to achieve women's rights and equality through mobilising, influencing and building solidarity.

Our Values guide us. They are given expression in our work and in how we work as an organisation.

Feminist

- In all of our work, we acknowledge the unfair systems and barriers that all women face, no matter our differences.
- We work together to empower women to lead the changes needed for women's rights and equality.
- We focus on supporting women who have the least access to power.

Courageous

- We stand firm on women's rights and equality and challenge those in positions of power who undermine or oppose our campaign for positive change.
- We do not shy away from having tough conversations and speak up when it is needed.
- We try out new ways of working, embrace mistakes as learning opportunities and nurture a culture of self-reflection.

Strategic

- To be successful in achieving our goals, we are thoughtful and plan carefully.
- This means showing leadership, working well with partners, and focusing on what matters most. It means making choices that are achievable/realistic and will help us in the future.

Informed

- Our work is based on the lived experiences of women in their diversity, paying extra attention to the most marginalised women. This and other available accurate evidence and research inform all of our materials, events, publications and communications.
- Our staff is highly professional with proven expertise in their areas of work.

Inclusive

- We understand that women and girls are all different, and many will face different forms of discrimination at the same time, including but not limited to discriminations based on race, ability, sexual orientation, class, gender expression and ethnicity.
- We pro-actively include women from diverse backgrounds and offer extra support to those who might face more challenges in getting involved in our work.
- We are aware of potential bias and check our own institutional privilege and power.

Caring

- We recognise care as essential to life, rooted in our interdependence with each other and the planet, and as a collective force that sustains people and communities
- We recognise and value care in all its forms.
- We recognise the connections between gender, care, and the environment.
- We advocate for policies that put care at the heart of economic, social, and environmental systems.
- We foster an organisational culture that prioritises the well-being of staff and members; care starts within.



#EveryChild
EveryChild

Public,
affordable
childcare
NOW

Public,
affordable
childcare
NOW

Together for Public

Public Childcare

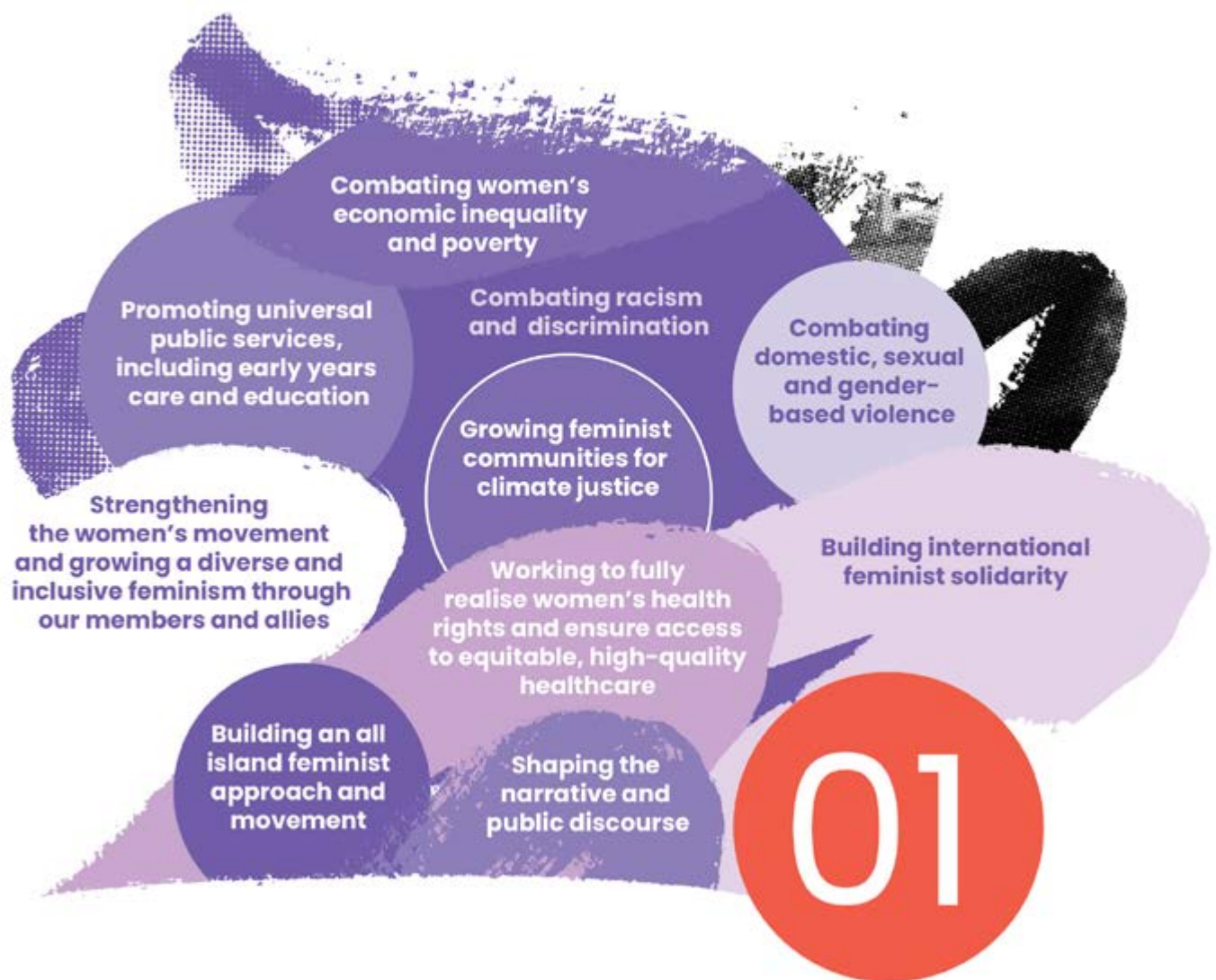
Campaign
Young People's Voice

affordable
childcare

Inclusion for NWC means that we recognise the diverse backgrounds and experiences of women including – but not limited to – disabled women, migrant women, women of colour, lone parents, women from Northern Ireland/the North of Ireland, women experiencing poverty, addiction and homelessness, women from working class communities, women from the LGBTQI+ community, women of all faiths and none, Traveller and Roma women, women from other ethnic minorities, women in prostitution and survivors of gender based violence and trauma, survivors of institutional abuse, women living with long-term health conditions, young women and older women, rural women, women in prisons, undocumented women, refugee women and women living in Direct Provision.

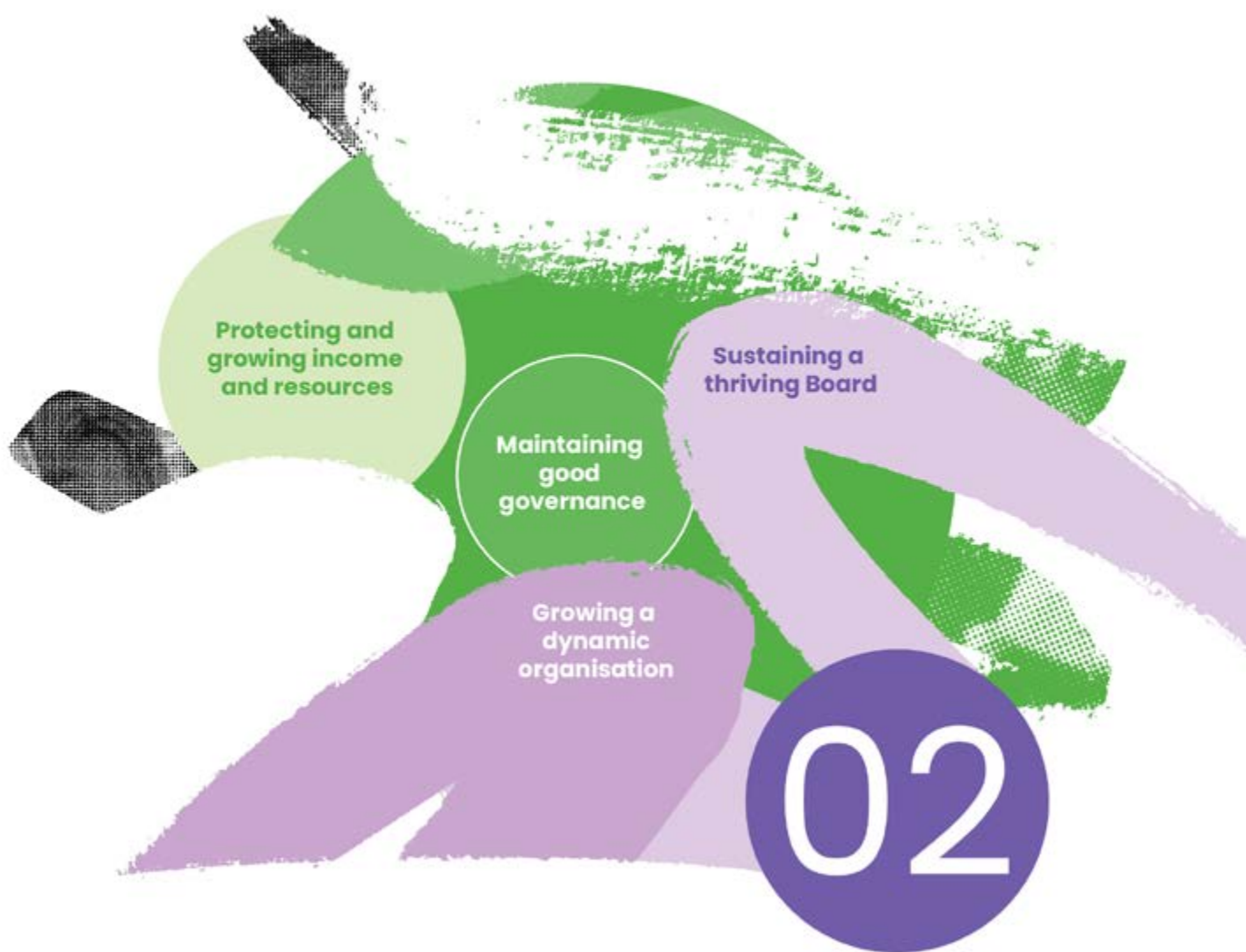
Strategic Goal 01

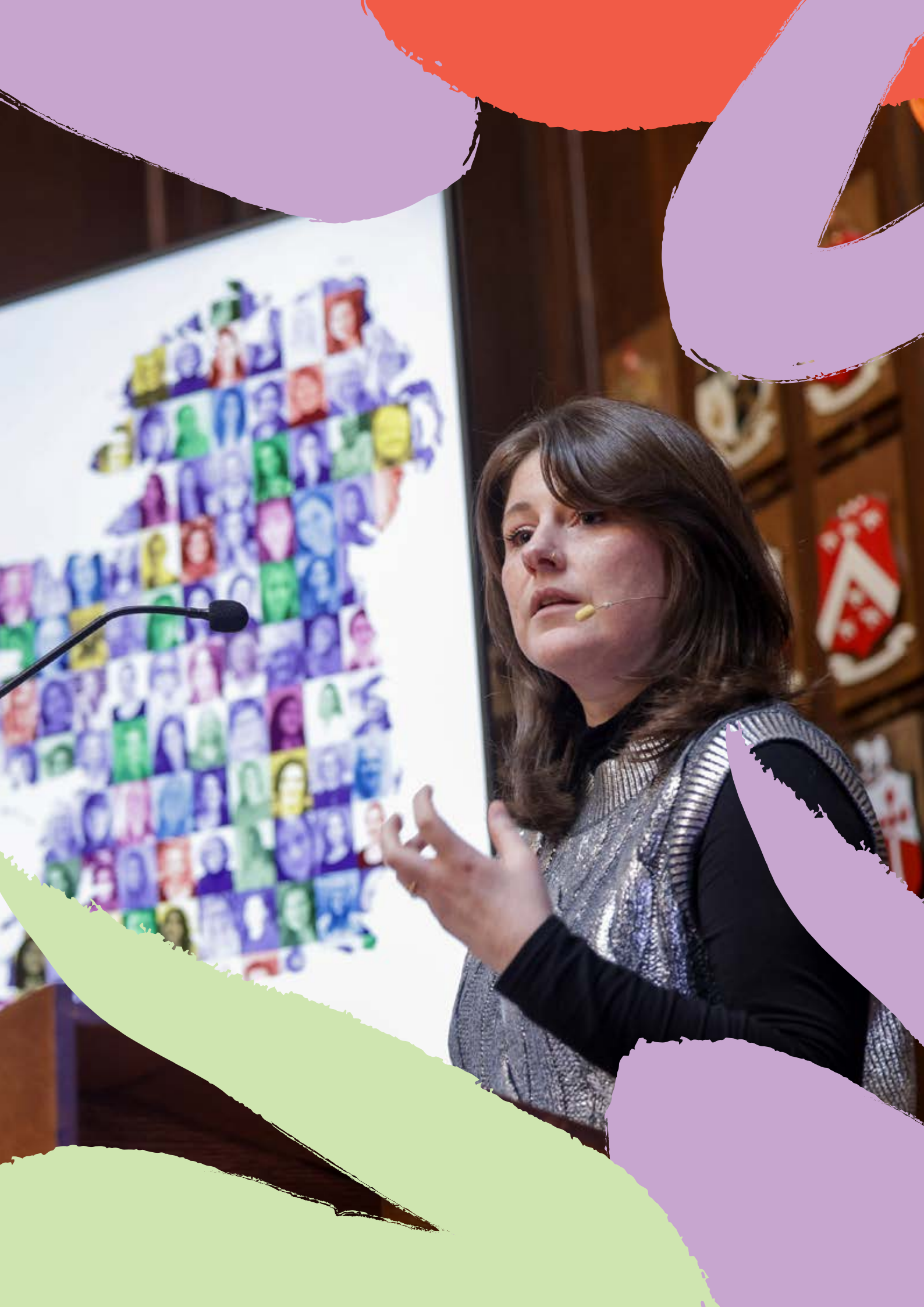
NWC will work strategically as the leading representative organisation to promote and advance women's human rights and equality, through mobilising, influencing and building solidarity.



Strategic Goal 02

NWC will continue to operate as a well-run, effective, diverse, caring, and accessible organisation, committed to solidarity.

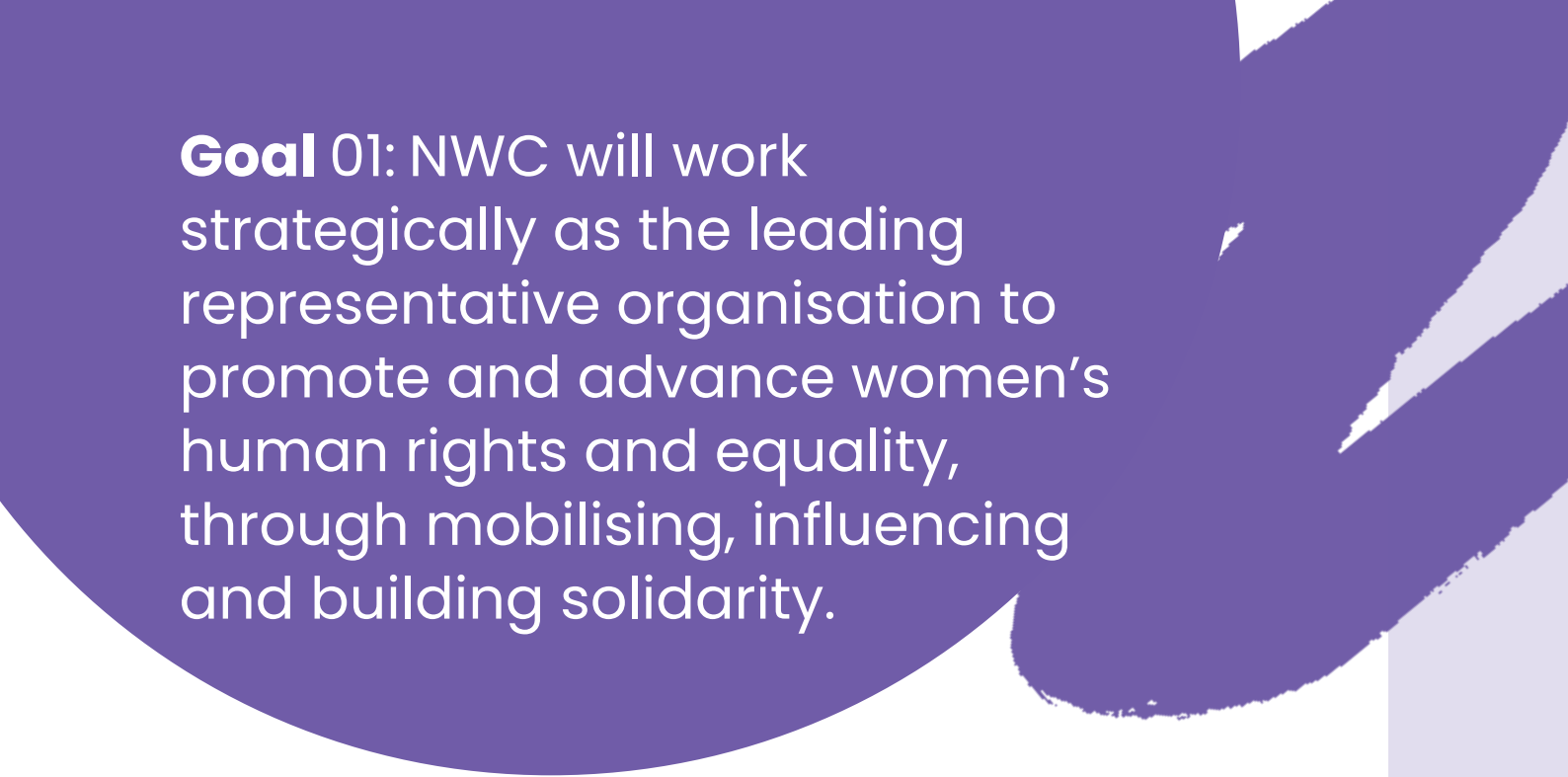






**Strategic
Goal**

01



Goal 01: NWC will work strategically as the leading representative organisation to promote and advance women's human rights and equality, through mobilising, influencing and building solidarity.

Actions

— **Combating women's economic inequality and poverty**

Outcome

NWC has influenced economic policy, law, and decision-making to advance gender equality and reduce poverty among women and girls, in particular in the areas of work, pay, social protection, pensions, taxation, and public spending.

— **Promoting universal public services, including early years care and education**

Outcome

NWC has shaped the development and delivery of universal public services to meet the needs of women and girls, including in health, housing, transport and early years education and care.

— **Combating racism and discrimination**


Outcome

NWC has challenged racism and discrimination of women by working collaboratively with our members to amplify the intersectionality of racism and sexism.

— **Growing feminist communities for climate justice**

Outcome

NWC has embedded feminist climate justice in climate policy and action across the island of Ireland, ensuring that gender equality is central to all climate solutions.

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- **Working to fully realise women's health rights and ensure access to equitable, high-quality healthcare**

Outcome

NWC has advanced a more responsive, gender-sensitive, and trauma-informed health system including reproductive healthcare and mental healthcare, that serves women and girls in all their diversity.

- **Combating domestic, sexual and gender-based violence**

Outcome

NWC has advanced the creation of a society where women can live free from violence and exploitation by shaping law, policy, and services ensuring a coordinated, intersectional, and survivor-led response.

- **Strengthening the women's movement and growing a diverse and inclusive feminism through our members and allies**

Outcome

NWC has expanded and strengthened a diverse, engaged, and active membership, growing a powerful, inclusive women's movement across the island of Ireland to drive change and tackle key challenges to gender equality.

- **Building an all island feminist approach and movement**

Outcome

NWC has developed a strong all-island approach to our work, leading change in both jurisdictions, advocating for greater harmonisation of laws, supports, and rights for women, playing a key role in building understanding and reconciliation across the island of Ireland.

- **Building international feminist solidarity**

Outcome

NWC has advocated for women's rights around the world through international alliances and campaigns to challenge women's oppression, promote gender equality, and support feminist movements worldwide.

- **Shaping the narrative and public discourse**

Outcome

NWC has increased visibility and awareness of our work among key audiences, including decision makers, media, our members, the general public and has influenced the public discourse on women's rights and equality.



775 forced to travel since Repeal



**Strategic
Goal**

02

Goal 02: NWC will continue to operate as a well-run, effective, diverse, caring, and accessible organisation, committed to solidarity.

Actions

— Maintaining good governance

Outcome

NWC has remained fully compliant with legal obligations, the Governance Code and our own governance policies and processes, and aim for best practice in HR.

— Protecting and growing income and resources

Outcome

NWC has maintained, diversified and increased its resources, including independent funding and funding from statutory bodies.

— Sustaining a thriving Board

Outcome

NWC has sustained a thriving Board, ensured its effectiveness, harnessed the expertise of Board members, and reflected the diversity of NWC members.

— Growing a dynamic organisation

Outcome

NWC has delivered an organisational structure which achieves the goals of the plan and has continued to nurture a culture of feminist ways of working, amongst Board, staff and members.



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