

National Women's Council of Ireland

# NWC Member Shadow Report

In advance of the examination of Ireland's  
eighth periodic report under the UN  
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms  
of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

May 2025



# Introduction

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.

NWC can play a significant role in the review of the State's progress under CEDAW, ensuring women's lived experiences and the inequalities and discrimination they face are recognised. This shadow report is grounded in extensive consultation with our membership and builds on NWC's recent research and policy work, including our submission on Ireland's next National Strategy for Women and Girls. It takes an intersectional approach, highlighting the compounded inequalities experienced by marginalised groups of women. While focused on recommendations for Government in the South, NWC acknowledges shared challenges faced by women across the island of Ireland and calls for stronger North–South cooperation centred on peacebuilding and reconciliation. Although progress has been made since 2017, this report focuses on the systemic barriers faced by women – particularly for marginalised groups—in areas such as healthcare, economic equality, domestic, sexual, gender-based violence (DSGBV), housing, participation, and climate justice, often worsened by legislative gaps, weak policy implementation, and inadequate services.

This data provides a stark snapshot of the systemic inequalities facing women in Ireland –

**Violence against women:** In 2023, Women's Aid saw the highest disclosures of domestic violence ever recorded by the organisation in 50 years<sup>1</sup>. In the same year, the Gardaí received a domestic abuse call every 10 minutes<sup>2</sup> and according to the CSO Sexual Violence Survey, 52% of women will experience sexual violence in their lifetime<sup>3</sup>

**Economic inequality:** The gender pay gap is 9.3% and the gender pension gap is almost 4 times that at 35%<sup>4</sup>

**Poverty:** Nearly half of lone parent households, mostly women, are experiencing deprivation, significantly higher than the national average of 15.7%<sup>5</sup>

**Childcare:** Ireland has some of the highest childcare costs in Europe<sup>6</sup>, ranking among the top 3 for highest fees

**Reproductive rights:** About 240 women travel to the UK from Ireland every year to access abortion, an estimated 1,680 women since 2019<sup>7</sup>

**Political participation:** Women hold just 28% of local council seats—below the EU average of 35%

<sup>1</sup>Women's Aid. (2024). Annual impact report 2023.

<sup>2</sup>McDonagh, D. (2024, February 9). Gardaí received a domestic abuse call every 10 minutes last year. Irish Mirror.

<sup>3</sup>Central Statistics Office. (2023). Sexual violence survey: Disclosure of experiences key findings. Government of Ireland.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Central Statistics Office. (2025, March 11). [https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionsilcenforceddeprivation2024/Survey on Income and Living Conditions \(SILC\) 2024: Enforced Deprivation](https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionsilcenforceddeprivation2024/Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024: Enforced Deprivation).

<sup>6</sup>The Times. (2025, February 2). High childcare costs leave Irish families 'lagging' behind European peers.

<sup>7</sup>The Journal. (2025, April 8). 'The most vulnerable are still being exported': Why and how women have to travel for abortions.

# Legal/Policy Framework

## National Strategy for Women and Girls

The National Strategy for Women and Girls (2017–2020) lacked robust indicators, clear implementation plans, and adequate monitoring<sup>8</sup>, falling short of CEDAW's 2017 recommendation. The new Strategy presents an opportunity to advance women's rights, but must address these previous shortfalls. It should incorporate outstanding Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality recommendations and address emerging challenges such as poverty, cost of living, housing precarity, violence against women, and climate change. Cross-government collaboration is essential for a coordinated, intersectional approach. Crucially, women's organisations must be meaningfully involved in its ongoing development and delivery through co-design to ensure it reflects lived experience and fosters shared ownership.

## Gender Proof/Coordinate National Law and Policy

Gender mainstreaming is essential to tackling systemic and intersectional inequalities faced by women and girls. Despite Ireland's participation in the EU's 2022 Technical Support Instrument on gender mainstreaming in public policy and budget processes, progress has been limited, with poor integration of gender across key policy areas such as migration<sup>9</sup>.

## Gender Budgeting

The renewed commitment to gender budgeting in the Programme for Government (PfG) presents a vital opportunity to re-energise progress. If effectively implemented and informed by robust data, gender budgeting can help reduce inequalities and improve outcomes for women, particularly in taxation, social protection, and public services.

## Incitement to Hatred/Equality Legislation

Ireland's new Hate Offences Act recognises hate as an aggravating factor in crimes, but laws on incitement to hatred remain outdated and ineffective—particularly against rising hate speech and far-right disinformation. Between 2023 and 2024, reported hate crimes and related incidents rose by 4%. Anti-race remains the most common discriminatory motive, increasing from 36% to 39%<sup>10</sup>.

In 2017, the Committee raised concerns that legislation which discriminates against or disproportionately negatively impacts women may fall outside the scope of the Equal Status Acts. Without explicit protection for intersectional discrimination, those facing the most serious and complex forms of inequality risk being left unprotected.

## LBGT+ Rights

The LBGT+ community continues to face significant barriers, with Ireland ranking 16th in Europe for LBGT+ rights. Key legislative gaps remain, including the absence of hate crime laws, a ban on conversion practices, and intersex rights. Protections in gender recognition, anti-discrimination, and employment also require strengthening. There is a fundamental need for informed-consent gender-affirming care, improved mental health services, and health and social care supports that meet the needs of older LBGT+ people.

## Sustainable Development Goals

In 2017, the Committee urged Ireland to collect disaggregated data to inform policy on women and girls and track progress on the SDGs. However, persistent barriers remain, including poor gender mainstreaming, limited resourcing, inadequate data, and weak political accountability. Without coordinated, cross-departmental action and meaningful engagement with women and marginalised groups, Ireland risks failing to meet its commitments.

## UNCRPD

In Ireland, 22% of the population has a disability<sup>11</sup>. Disabled women face persistent barriers to full participation. Despite ratifying the UNCRPD in 2018, progress remains slow. Just 34% of disabled people are employed, and poverty rates are high<sup>12</sup>. The now-defunct Green Paper on Disability Reform lacked engagement with Disabled Persons Organisations and failed to meet UNCRPD obligations, reflecting a narrow, siloed approach on social protection and labour activation.

<sup>8</sup>Kavanagh, L., Sweeney, L., Farahani, Z., Radomska, A., & Bailey, I. (2023). Realising the promise of national equality policy: An evaluation of the processes of implementation of three national equality strategies. Centre for Effective Services.

<sup>9</sup>Economic and Social Research Institute. (2023). Social inclusion and the role of the public services in Ireland.

<sup>10</sup>An Garda Síochána. (2025, April). 2024 hate crime data and related discriminatory motives.

<sup>11</sup>Central Statistics Office. (2023, August 31). Press statement: Census 2022 results - Profile 4, disability, health and carers.

<sup>12</sup>Central Statistics Office. (2023). Census 2022 profile 4: Disability, health and carers - Disability and everyday living.

# Recommendations – The State should:

1. Ensure full implementation of the new NSWG through co-design with women's organisations, a fully costed action plan with clear timelines, indicators, designated responsibilities, dedicated funding, and robust monitoring mechanisms
2. Embed gender mainstreaming at all stages of policy, budgeting, and service delivery by conducting gender impact assessments, tracking outcomes, in addition to a coordinated, intersectional approach across the NSWG and all equality strategies
3. Legislate for gender budgeting across all levels of government, supported by a National Equality Data Strategy and enhanced performance budgeting. This must include gender proofing, impact assessments, and spending review analysis, with departments resourced and trained through multi-annual funding<sup>13</sup>
4. Expedite incitement to hatred legislation, introduce an Action Plan Against Hate, including targeted measures for women, especially for marginalised groups, and implement the National Action Plan Against Racism with an enhanced focus on the intersection between racism and sexism
5. Reform equality legislation to prohibit discrimination based on socio-economic status, explicitly recognise multiple and intersectional discrimination, expand access to justice, reform exemptions, and ensure protection for gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics<sup>14,15</sup>
6. Publish a new, fully resourced LGBT+ Inclusion Strategy with measurable actions and strong accountability to address systemic discrimination
7. Embed the SDGs in all policy frameworks using a feminist, rights-based approach, with gender-disaggregated data, effective monitoring, cross-departmental coordination, and engagement with women's groups
8. Fully realise the UNCRPD by embedding its principles across policies and legislation, and urgently publish a rights-based, whole-of-government National Disability Strategy co-designed with DPOs

<sup>13</sup>OECD. (2021). Strengthening economic and social rights: Summary of findings.

<sup>14</sup>Free Legal Advice Centres (FLAC). (2021, December). FLAC submission to the consultation on the review of the Equality Acts.

<sup>15</sup>Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. (2023, July 20). Submission on the review of the Equality Acts.

# Access to Justice

## Women in Prison

The number of women in prison, including those on remand, has risen in recent years<sup>16</sup>, with serious impacts on women, families and communities. Overcrowding remains a major issue. Limerick women's prison is at 146% capacity and the Dóchas Centre is at 103%<sup>17</sup>. This has severe implications for pregnant women and mothers due to a lack of mother and baby facilities. The overrepresentation of certain groups is concerning – Travellers (0.7% of the population) account for up to 22% of the female prison population<sup>18</sup>.

## Redress for Survivors of Institutional/ Historical Abuse

The State has repeatedly failed to ensure rights-based, independent, survivor-centred, investigations into historic human rights violations against women and girls<sup>19</sup> –including in the Magdalene Laundries, Mother and Maby homes, foster care, and symphysiotomy. Redress schemes remain inadequate, with the 2023 Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme excluding many survivors, including those in institutions for under six months. This reflects a broader pattern of restricting access to justice.

## Access to Support Services (VAW)

Access to legal aid remains a major barrier for victims/survivors of domestic violence<sup>20</sup>. Strict financial eligibility criteria and low-income thresholds exclude many women from support. Limited legal aid capacity undermines full judicial processes and survivor's access to justice. This particularly impacts marginalised women and children. Waivers exist but are poorly promoted. Legal professionals often lack trauma informed, gender sensitive, non-discriminatory DSGBV training. Court support services, often provided by under-resourced civil society groups, are inconsistent and ad hoc.

## Residential Settings

Women in inpatient and residential care settings (mental health, disability and older persons) face serious human rights violations, including deprivation of liberty, overmedicalisation, seclusion/restraint, and a lack of person-centred care. Inadequate safeguarding and weak complaints mechanisms further expose them to abuse and deny meaningful access to justice. The Farrelly Commission findings (Grace case) highlight systemic failures in protecting disabled women and girls, rooted in the absence of a rights-based approach that respects the person's will and preferences. Urgent action is also needed to remove barriers to justice for non-speaking women.

<sup>16</sup>Irish Penal Reform Trust. (2024, October 14). Submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth consultation on the next National Strategy for Women and Girls.

<sup>17</sup>Irish Penal Reform Trust. (2025, May 15). Submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

<sup>18</sup>O'Flaherty, M. (2025, February 3). Memorandum on the human rights of Travellers and Roma in Ireland. Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights.

<sup>19</sup>Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. (2022). Ireland and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

<sup>20</sup>National Women's Council, & Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland. (2024, November). North South Co-operation to Tackle Violence Against Women: Dialogue Report.

# Recommendations – The State should:

1. Reduce imprisonment of women through gender sensitive alternatives to detention, address racial and ethnic disparities—particularly for Traveller women—and improve custodial conditions
2. Ensure independent, survivor-centred investigations and accessible redress schemes that uphold rights to truth, justice, and reparation. All measures, including the national compensation scheme for domestic and sexual abuse, must meet international obligations and address survivors' needs
3. Invest in free and accessible legal aid and court accompaniment for all DSGBV survivors and ensure all services are culturally appropriate and trauma informed
4. Urgently reform the Mental Health Act, embed rights-based deprivation of liberty safeguards, and enhance safeguarding, inquiry, advocacy, and complaints mechanisms in all inpatient, residential and foster care settings



# Gender-Based Violence

## Implementation of the Third National Strategy

NWC partnered with Government to develop the Third National Strategy on DSGBV. As a result of the Strategy, in 2024, Cuan was established, a statutory agency to lead a whole-of-government response to DSGBV. The strategy provides an ambitious framework – the focus is now required on implementation—particularly in data collection, justice system reform, structured engagement and inclusion of survivor voices. Critically an intersectional approach to meet the needs of all women and girls is needed<sup>21</sup>. While Ireland has made strides in implementing the Istanbul Convention, these obligations remain to be fully realised to respond to its epidemic levels of DSGBV.

## Funding for Frontline/Specialist Services

Frontline and specialist DSGBV services are vital to implementing the TNS, yet funding remains short-term, inadequate and insecure. Despite the Committee's 2017 recommendation to adequately resource NGOs supporting victims, the Irish NGO Observatory on VAWG has raised serious concerns about this continued instability.

## Data Collection

One of the key challenges in implementing the TNS is the lack of robust, up-to-date data and effective monitoring. The 2023 Sexual Violence Survey was the first major study of the prevalence of sexual violence in Ireland since 2002, and a similar national survey on domestic violence is underway. Further sustained investment is needed to ensure reliable, inclusive, and disaggregated data—particularly for marginalised groups such as Traveller, Roma, disabled, and migrant women. Robust data collection is critical to ensure policies and services can prevent violence and fully respond to the diverse needs of women and girls. The Committee's 2017 call for gold-standard, disaggregated data remains unmet.

## Survivor-Centred Justice System

The State's new PFG includes welcome commitments to victim/survivor-centred justice reform. Recent research by NWC and the Department of Justice shows many victim/survivors of DSGBV must navigate three separate legal systems—criminal, family, and childcare law—causing trauma and revictimisation<sup>22</sup>. Their needs are often unmet, worsened by the lack of coordination across these systems. The State must act on the report's recommendations to improve collaboration and data sharing across legal processes and centre survivors' needs. Key reforms include increased court and non-court supports (including free

legal aid), trauma-informed training, more judges to reduce delays, and reform of the in camera rule to ensure transparency, consistency, and access to supports while protecting women's privacy and safety. More broadly, the State must commit to and invest in the development of survivor-centred structures at the core of all DSGBV responses.

Protecting confidentiality and timely access to justice are also essential to a survivor-centred approach in the legal system. Currently, survivors' counselling notes can be used in court, a serious breach of privacy that deters many from engaging with the legal system, in seeking support and contributes to a narrative that discredits victims.

## Review of Part 4 (Sexual Offences Act)

The Review of Part 4 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 has the potential to advance a zero-tolerance approach to sexual exploitation and violence against women. There is, however, an urgent need for increased public awareness of the law, reduction in demand, and delivery of specialised, culturally appropriate, trauma-informed exit supports for women in prostitution. The Committee's previous call for dedicated exit programmes remains unmet.

## FGM

An estimated 5,790 women and girls in Ireland have undergone FGM<sup>23</sup>. While recognised as gender-based violence in the TNS, FGM must be fully addressed across all pillars, including training, awareness, and supports. A National Action Plan, proposed in 2015 by AkiDwA remains unadopted.

## Misogyny/ Online Abuse

A core pillar of the TNS is prevention—focused on dismantling the social and cultural norms that enable GBV. The Committee has raised concerns about gaps in legal protections against emerging abuses like online stalking and harassment, highlighting broader challenges in implementing this pillar. These include the harmful impact of pornography, lack of targeted awareness for marginalised groups, and difficulties in rolling out the new SPHE curriculum (to address gender stereotypes and violence). The rise in online violence against women and weak online safety protections further compound these issues.

<sup>21</sup>Irish Observatory on Violence Against Women. (2023).

<sup>22</sup>National Women's Council & Department of Justice. (2023). Report on the intersection of the criminal justice, private family law, and public law childcare processes in relation to domestic and sexual violence.

<sup>23</sup>AkiDwA. (n.d.). Female genital mutilation.



# Recommendations – The State should:

1. Strengthen cross-departmental coordination and co-design with civil society in implementing the TNS and its successor; ensure all departmental commitments are fully costed and funded
2. Provide secure, multi-annual funding to Cuan to fulfil its mandate, and administer required resources to frontline services – ensuring capacity to meet rising demand and retain skilled staff. Ring-fence additional funding for DSGBV research, advocacy, and awareness
3. Invest in the development and implementation of survivor engagement structures to place survivors' experiences at the core of DSGBV responses and reforms
4. Develop a coordinated DSGBV Data Strategy—led by Cuan—in addition to robust monitoring and data collection systems for high-quality, disaggregated data and analysis across all relevant departments and agencies
5. Fully implement recommendations from the NWC and Department of Justice report to deliver victim-survivor-centred justice reform, prioritising reform of the in-camera rule to safeguard women's privacy, safety, and access to support
6. Legislate to restrict access to survivors' counselling notes ensuring protection from disclosure. Safeguards must also prevent trial delays and uphold survivors' privacy, access to justice, and to therapeutic supports
7. Fully implement the 2025 Review of Part 4 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017, prioritising exit supports for women in prostitution—across healthcare, housing, legal and migration support, social protection, and employment
8. Develop a co-designed National Action Plan to Combat FGM and fully integrate FGM across all pillars of the TNS and its successor strategy
9. Establish a national framework to address technology-facilitated GBV, including measures to combat intimate image abuse, ensure accountability for perpetrators and tech platforms, and create a safer digital environment for women and girls
10. Fully resource and embed RSE within SPHE by providing comprehensive teacher training, resources and tools, expanding graduate and CPD programmes, and establishing a gender-sensitive curriculum review framework with ongoing community input

# Women's Health

## Universal Healthcare

Despite a renewed PfG commitment to Sláintecare, progress remains slow, with no clear roadmap to deliver universal healthcare for all women and girls. Many women—particularly those from marginalised communities—rely on public services – yet face significant barriers in a system shaped by privatisation and inequality. This is especially pertinent given the disproportionate burden of chronic health conditions on women, including endometriosis and autoimmune diseases such as lupus, with over 70% of chronic pain sufferers being women<sup>24</sup>.

## Women's Health Action Plan

NWC supported the Department of Health in developing Ireland's first Women's Health Action Plan (2023–2024) and its successor (2024–2025). While progress has been made in areas such as free contraception, fertility treatment, menopause, and gynaecological care, the plans lack adequate focus on the needs of marginalised women. Traveller women, for instance, experience significant health disparities, including higher rates of chronic illnesses, mental health difficulties and lower life expectancy, in addition to a lack of culturally appropriate services which effectively meet their needs<sup>25</sup>.

## Abortion Access

The repeal of the 8th Amendment was a pivotal step for women's reproductive rights. However, persistent barriers to local, timely, equitable, and accessible services remain. The 2023 Independent Review on Abortion identified legislative and operational barriers including criminalisation, the mandatory 3-day wait period, and the need to address the current 28-day viability clause for fatal foetal anomalies. While all 19 maternity hospitals now provide care, gaps remain, particularly at local level and in relation to data collection. The Committee has previously raised concerns about women and girls needing to travel, the impact on those unable to do so, and the need to fully decriminalise abortion. These challenges continue.

## Free Contraception

The Free Contraception Scheme, introduced in 2022, has reduced the financial burden of contraception for many women. However, gaps remain for marginalised groups and for those

excluded by the current age limit of 17 to 35 years. Universal access to contraception is a cornerstone of reproductive health. In the UK, contraception is free to all, including adolescents. Expanding Ireland's scheme to universal access would enhance contraceptive choice and equity. This is especially urgent amid rising living costs and structural inequalities faced by marginalised communities.

## Mental Health

Women face significant barriers in accessing mental health services, including long waits, lack of gender-sensitive care, and stigma—particularly around motherhood and caregiving<sup>26</sup>. This is particularly true for marginalised women, including migrant, Traveller and Roma women. Despite a worsening crisis, mental health funding remains below 6% of the health budget—well short of Sláintecare's 10% target. The persistent lack of new development funding undermines implementation of Sharing the Vision, Ireland's mental health policy, and its commitment to gender-sensitive services.

## Mother and Baby Unit (MBU)

Ireland currently lacks a dedicated MBU, a key element of the HSE's perinatal mental health model of care that remains undelivered. As a result, women needing inpatient care after childbirth are separated from their babies. MBUs are vital for keeping mothers and infants together, delivering essential mental health care, and supporting the mother-infant bond.

## Maternity Care

The National Maternity Strategy (2016) remains poorly implemented, with inadequate resourcing and limited investment in community-based and continuity-of-care models. There are concerns about limited choices, excessive interventions, and the unmet needs of marginalised women. The long-promised National Maternity Hospital remains undelivered. The absence of a fully funded, publicly owned, woman-centred maternity system breaches Ireland's obligations under CEDAW.

<sup>24</sup>Campbell, P (2003) Relieving endometriosis pain: why is it so tough? Obstetrics and Gynecology Clinics of North America.

<sup>25</sup>Government of Ireland. (2024). National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II (2024–2028). Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

<sup>26</sup>Mental Health Reform. (2023, March). The experiences of women engaging with mental health services.

# Recommendations – The State should:

1. Fully implement Sláintecare through a clear, gender-sensitive lens, ensuring universal healthcare for all women and girls, with targeted actions for marginalised groups and a minimum of 10% of the annual health budget allocated to its delivery
2. Invest in and strengthen the Women's Health Action Plans to address health inequalities through targeted, culturally appropriate supports for marginalised women, ensuring equal access, experience, and outcomes in healthcare
3. Roll out free HRT to all who need it and extend coverage to include GP visit costs
4. Implement the Independent Abortion Review and expand abortion care in line with international human rights standards, including WHO guidance and best clinical practice, to ensure timely, equitable, and local access
5. Expand the free contraception scheme to people of all ages
6. Invest in a gender-sensitive implementation of Sharing the Vision to reform mental health services and improve outcomes for all women and girls
7. Urgently establish Ireland's first MBU and invest in the updated Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Model of Care. This must include enhanced specialist, primary, and community-level supports; targeted actions for marginalised groups; and trauma-informed, gender-responsive, and culturally sensitive care
8. Establish a woman-centred, state-of-the-art National Maternity Hospital without further delay, with independent governance and budgeting, and co-design a new National Maternity Strategy with civil society

# Care and Support

**The defeat of the referendum in March 2024 to remove Article 41.2 and replace it with a provision recognising family care means the original text—referencing women's role in the home—remains in the Constitution. This language no longer reflects the realities of women's lives or acknowledges the role of men in care. NWC has raised concerns that unclear wording and a lack of political leadership contributed to public confusion and limited voter engagement. NWC continues to advocate for enhanced care and support services and the advancement of women's rights.**

## Public Childcare

While public investment for childcare has increased, families—particularly lone parents, Traveller and Roma communities, migrants, and those in rural or disadvantaged areas—continue to face high fees, limited availability, and a lack of services. Low pay and poor conditions for many Early Years workers lead to high turnover. The new PFG commitment to fee reductions and public provision is welcome. A publicly delivered and funded ECEC system—including school-age care—is essential to ensuring affordable, accessible, high-quality services that support women's participation and improve outcomes for children and families.

## Family leave

Currently, Irish family leave payments cover less than a third of average earnings—well below EU norms<sup>27</sup> and there is a larger gap between end of paid leave and start of ECEC services<sup>28</sup>. This has serious implications for women, often forcing them to leave work, reduce their hours, or accept less senior roles—particularly affecting lone parents and other marginalised groups.

## Universal Social Care System

There is a crisis in care and support in Ireland, marked by under-resourcing, poor accessibility, and lack of person-centred

care. Disabled people, older persons, and their families face long waiting lists, geographical blackspots, limited respite, and inadequate access to essential services. The continued expansion of private, profit-driven care undermines quality, affordability, and equity.

## Home Support

Despite increased investment, nearly 6,000 people remain on waiting lists for home support, with significant delays, and geographical blackspots<sup>29</sup>. Recruitment and retention remain serious challenges, driven by low pay and poor working conditions. A high-quality, person-centred, rights-based system is essential to support older women to live independently at home. The introduction of a statutory home support scheme has faced repeated delays.

## Personal Assistance

A Personal Assistance Service (PAS) is essential to ensuring disabled people can live independently, exercise autonomy, and participate actively in all areas of society. Despite its recognised value and cost effectiveness, Ireland still lacks a structured, rights-based PAS. Due to this shortcoming, many disabled people face barriers to accessing supports and are forced to rely on family, undermining their independence.

## Independent/Supported Community Living

Older women—more likely to live alone in poor-quality housing—face heightened risks, yet national housing policy lacks a gendered lens. While the Housing Options for Our Ageing Population framework offers a pathway to ageing in place with dignity, progress is slow. Over 1,000 women with intellectual disabilities continue to live in institutions despite the promises of successive governments to close these settings by 2018.

## Participation Income

A Participation Income would recognise meaningful contributions beyond paid employment—such as care, support, and voluntary work. In Ireland, women carry a disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care – with 60% of all family carers being women<sup>30</sup>. Countries like the Netherlands have begun valuing such contributions through similar models.

<sup>27</sup>OECD (2021) OECD Family Database: F2.1. Parental Leave Systems.

<sup>28</sup>Oireachtas Library & Research Services (2021) L&RS Bill Digest: Family Law Bill 2021.

<sup>29</sup>Oireachtas. (2024, June 27). Dáil Éireann debate: Waiting lists and home support.

<sup>30</sup>See CSO data.

# Recommendations – The State should:

1. Deliver a public ECEC system by legislating for universal access, expanding public provision—prioritising underserved areas—and ensuring decent pay for educators. The promised consultation and Action Plan in the new PFG must prioritise this public system
2. Increase and extend family leave to adequate, benchmarked levels; explore a percentage-of-earnings model; convert unpaid parental leave to paid; ensure equal access for lone parents; support flexible work
3. Move towards a universal, rights-based social care system that delivers person-centred supports promoting autonomy, independence, and dignity. Gender must be central to its design and delivery to meet the needs of all women and girls
4. Prioritise establishment of the statutory home support scheme – implementing the Strategic Workforce Advisory Group’s recommendations, establishing sustainable funding, reforming regulation and licensing, rolling out InterRAI for better data, adopting a gender-responsive model, and enhancing community supports
5. Legislate for a statutory right to personal assistance, based on a clearly defined system, aligned with CRPD, to support disabled women to live independently and participate fully and equally in all aspects of society
6. Invest in gender-sensitive housing options for older and disabled people, prioritising universal design, integrated supports, and expanded Housing Adaptation Grants. Housing must reflect women’s needs and support real choice
7. Pilot a Participation Income, commencing with local authority-led initiatives

# Employment and Economic Equality

## Gender Pay Gap

The current employment system fails to recognise and value care responsibilities, limiting many women's participation in the labour market. Lone parents, migrants, ethnic minority women, Travellers, Roma, disabled and young women face particular barriers. Such inequalities – undermine women's lifetime earnings, adequate pensions, and financial security.

## Collective Bargaining

Collective bargaining coverage in Ireland remains low, and as of May 2025, the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages has yet to be fully transposed. This Directive requires a national action plan to strengthen collective bargaining coverage.

## Pensions Inequality

Ireland's gender pension gap is around 35%, and the pension system continues to rely on tax reliefs which disproportionately benefit men. NWC's recent research on the new auto-enrolment scheme<sup>31</sup>, due in 2026, identifies that the new scheme will not address the gender pension gap and may further exacerbate existing inequalities.

## Poverty/Cost of Living

In 2017 CEDAW called on the State to address the impact of austerity measures for women, particularly disadvantaged women. Women in Ireland—particularly lone parents, disabled women, Traveller, Roma, and migrant women—face high levels of poverty and deprivation, driven by structural labour market inequalities, unpaid care, and inadequate social protection.

## Benchmarking/Indexation

Increases to social protection rates in recent years have not kept pace with the rising cost of living. Women are disproportionately impacted by inadequate rates and continue to bear the brunt of the cost-of-living crisis, with inflation rising by more than 20% since 2020<sup>32</sup>. Despite some progress on individual payments in recent budgets, the Government has prioritised tax cuts over benchmarking and indexing social protection and pension rates.

## Individualise the Social Protection System

Ireland's social protection system continues to treat many women as dependents, particularly through the 'Qualified Adult' (QA) system. 90% of QAs are women<sup>33</sup>. It also applies many means tests at the household, rather than individual level. This creates financial dependency and limits access to labour market supports for QAs. Despite recommendations for reform, progress has been limited.

<sup>31</sup>NWC (2024). Still stuck in the gap: Pensions auto-enrolment from a gender and care lens.

<sup>32</sup>Central Statistics Office. (2020–2025). Consumer Price Index: January 2020 to April 2025.

<sup>33</sup>NESC (2021) Background Paper 151/4, 2021 – Ireland's Social Welfare System: Gender, Family and Class.

# Recommendations – The State should:

1. Lift the reservation under Article 11(1) of CEDAW and take concrete action to eliminate discrimination in employment and close the gender pay gap. This includes gender- and equality-proofing all labour policies, introducing the living wage without further delay, and improving pay and conditions for women, particularly in low-paid, insecure sectors, such as care and community work
2. Legislate for a statutory right to collective bargaining across the labour market, with a focus on female-dominated sectors like care, to improve pay and working conditions
3. Introduce a universal state pension benchmarked to average earnings to ensure adequate income for all
4. Integrate a strong gender lens across all anti-poverty measures, with targeted action for lone parents, disabled, Traveller, Roma, and migrant women
5. Establish the Minimum Essential Standard of Living as the benchmark for social protection payments, and index rates, thresholds, disregards and secondary benefits
6. Adopt a fully individualised social protection system to ensure women are treated as individuals, not dependents



# Housing/ Accommodation/ Homelessness

## Gender Proofing / Targeted Supports

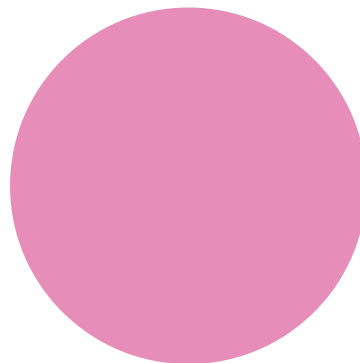
Ireland's housing and homelessness crisis continues to severely impact women, with one of the highest rates of female homelessness in the EU<sup>34</sup>. Many 'hidden homeless'—including women in refuges and Traveller and Roma families living roadside—are excluded from official data. Marginalised women face barriers to secure housing, with migrant women being more likely to live in overcrowded housing and experience homelessness<sup>35</sup>. The Housing Commission's recent report highlights a national deficit of up to 250,000 homes, which significantly undermines women and girls' access to housing.

## Refuge Units/Long –Term Housing

Domestic abuse is a leading cause of homelessness for women and children in Ireland<sup>36</sup>. Despite a commitment to double refuge spaces to 280 nationally, this falls significantly short of Council of Europe guidelines<sup>37</sup>. The acute shortage in rural areas and geographical blackspots remain a challenge. Nine counties lacked any refuge provision as of June 2024<sup>38</sup>.

## Sex for Rent

Women in Ireland's private rental sector face growing housing insecurity, with marginalised groups most vulnerable to exploitation. One of the most harmful and gendered forms is "sex-for-rent" arrangements, where landlords offer accommodation in exchange for sex<sup>39</sup>. Structurally vulnerable women, including those experiencing poverty, disability, insecure immigration status, domestic violence, or low-paid work, are most at risk.



<sup>34</sup>Bretheron, J., & Mayock, P. (2021).

<sup>35</sup>Economic and Social Research Institute. (2023). Social inclusion and the role of the public services in Ireland.

<sup>36</sup>Mercy Law Resource Centre. (2023). Social housing, domestic violence, and the public sector duty: The legal and policy context.

<sup>37</sup>Council of Europe. (2023). Protecting women from violence: Shelter services.

<sup>38</sup>Holland, K. (2024, June 18). Nine counties have no refuge for women, children suffering domestic violence – SF leader. The Irish Times.

<sup>39</sup>NWC. (2024). Sex for rent: An NWC report on sexual exploitation and sexual harassment in the rental housing market.

# Recommendations – The State should:

1. Gender-proof all housing policy, legislation, and budgets, and deliver targeted measures for marginalised women, including implementation of the Independent Expert Group on Traveller Accommodation
2. Implement the recommendations of the 2024 Housing Commission report and substantially increase investment in state-led housing to increase supply
3. Increase refuge spaces to at least 500, in line with EU guidelines, ensuring nationwide coverage and services that meet the diverse needs of women. Guarantee access to secure, long-term housing for DSGBV survivors, and urgently reform the Habitual Residence Condition to remove housing and social protection barriers for those fleeing abuse
4. Criminalise the proposing of sex-for-rent and strengthen regulation and tenant protections in the private rental sector. Extend the Residential Tenancies Act to cover licensee agreements and expand the Residential Tenancies Board's remit to address sexual harassment. These reforms must be backed by rent controls, an eviction ban, and enhanced inspections

# Women's Participation

## Politics

Ireland must take targeted action to increase women's participation in politics and public life, including introducing local quotas, supporting Traveller, Roma, migrant and disabled women's participation, and providing financial and practical supports. Persistent barriers such as childcare gaps, financial pressure, and harassment remain. While national quotas have improved representation, local quotas are now urgently needed to ensure diverse and representative local government.

## Corporate Boards

In 2022, NWC launched the Balance the Odds campaign to increase women's representation on corporate boards. A private members' bill has since proposed a 33% quota for women on boards, rising to 40% after three years, with sanctions for non-compliance. In November 2022, the EU adopted the Women on Boards Directive, requiring by 2026 at least 40% of non-executive directors or 33% of all board members be from the underrepresented gender.

## STEM

Women occupy just 25% of STEM jobs in Ireland<sup>40</sup>. Male students are twice as likely to be encouraged to pursue tech studies compared to their female peers. Addressing this imbalance is crucial, as women's unique insights can drive more innovative solutions in STEM fields and ensure that gender-specific issues are properly addressed.

## Education

Women face persistent barriers in education, including financial constraints, caring responsibilities, and harassment. One in five lone parents in Ireland are unable to access formal education due to costs. In academia, women are overrepresented in insecure, part-time roles (71%), while men dominate permanent full-time positions (60%)<sup>41</sup>.

## Women's Organisations

The women's sector plays a vital role in addressing poverty, isolation, and VAWG. Yet chronic underinvestment in women's groups and the wider community sector has deepened exclusion. Predominantly female roles remain low-paid and insecure, undermining grassroots, collective activism and political participation. In 2017, the Committee raised concerns about austerity's impact on women's NGOs and urged the restoration of funding to support the Convention's implementation. Funding for women's groups and programmes like SICAP remains far below 2008 levels. Amid rising hate and division, strong community organisations are essential to fostering inclusion, tackling inequality, and supporting women's participation.

## Peacebuilding/All Island Collaboration

Despite their vital roles in peacebuilding and reconciliation, women remain underrepresented in decision-making. The All-Island Women's Forum, led by NWC, promotes cross-border collaboration on women's equality. NWC's partnership with Women's Aid Federation NI on intimate partner violence further supports shared approaches to common challenges. These initiatives offer a foundation for harmonised North-South policy solutions to advance women's rights.

<sup>40</sup>McGuire, P. (2024, June 28). Women in STEM: Addressing imbalance is imperative for innovation. The Irish Times.

<sup>41</sup>Women in Research Ireland (2022) Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education Opening Statement.

# Recommendations – The State should:

1. Enact legislation for statutory gender quotas for local elections, targeting a minimum of 40% representation. Reform councillor remuneration to include care-related expenses and establish a formal mechanism to report and address harassment and abuse
2. Develop inclusive educational environments for women and girls in STEM and other male-dominated fields. Eliminate gender-based barriers to entry and retention and monitor gender gaps through data across all education and career stages
3. Legislate for gender quotas on corporate boards, starting with 33% representation and increasing to 40% within three years. Apply quotas to public and large private companies, with meaningful enforcement and sanctions to advance gender-balanced leadership
4. Expand financial and access supports to education for marginalised groups, including lone parents, Travellers, refugees, and international protection applicants. Improve postgraduate supports, including maternity leave, increase secure academic roles with fair pay and conditions for women and improve responses to harassment and violence
5. Significantly increase and ring-fence multi-annual funding for women's organisations and the wider community sector
6. Ring-fence a Women's Fund in future Shared Island programmes to support women's organisations in peacebuilding, reconciliation, and North/South cooperation
7. Ensure the second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security recognises the experiences of women in the North, and of shared all island challenges and solutions
8. Invest in targeted measures to improve rural women's access to services, infrastructure, and economic opportunities
9. Address land ownership inequalities through accessible, affordable mediation, and strengthen supports for female farmers and widows, including in response to related violence

# Feminist Climate Justice

## Feminist Climate Solutions

Disappointingly, Ireland's new PfG lacks sufficient prioritisation of climate action, failing to address the gendered impacts and solutions for women. Without inclusive, gender-sensitive measures across areas like transport, energy, and housing, women will remain disproportionately affected by climate change and environmental degradation.

## Energy Poverty

One in three households in Ireland experience energy poverty<sup>42</sup>, with female lone parents renting private accommodation most affected. Older women, disabled people, carers, and Travellers also face heightened risks. Retrofitting remains costly, with long wait times; in 2024, home assessments alone took 8–10 months<sup>43</sup>. The recent shift from the now-scrapped Energy Poverty Action Plan to a new Energy Affordability Action Plan is concerning, as it signals a diminished focus on poverty and those most at risk.

## Public Transport

The new PfG lacks ambition on public and active travel and fails to adopt a gender-sensitive and inclusive approach. This is especially concerning given ongoing issues with transport accessibility, reliability, and affordability—particularly in rural areas. Safety concerns also deter many women and marginalised groups, including LGBT+ people and people of colour, from using public transport, with 55% of women reporting they avoid it at night. Investment in expanded, inclusive public transport would reduce car dependency, lower household costs, and support climate goals.

<sup>42</sup>ESRI (2022) Energy Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland.

<sup>43</sup>Oireachtas. (2024, May 14). Written answers: Departmental Schemes (Question No. 128).

# Recommendations – The State should:

1. Gender, equality, and poverty-proof all climate policy, including through the work of the Just Transition, to ensure Ireland's green transition reduces—rather than reinforces—existing gender inequalities
2. Build research capacity to analyse the gendered impacts of energy poverty and increase investment in retrofitting schemes, prioritising affected groups such as lone parents, older women, disabled women, and Travellers
3. Prioritise and increase investment in public and active travel infrastructure, especially in rural areas, ensuring transport is safe, accessible, and affordable for all women, carers, disabled people, and marginalised communities

# Conclusion

The State must be held accountable for the multiple and intersecting inequalities faced by women and girls in Ireland. Efforts to improve the lives of women -in all their diversity—must be strengthened to advance gender equality and meet CEDAW obligations. Many of the Committee's 2017 recommendations remain unimplemented or lack meaningful progress. Meanwhile, new threats to women's rights have emerged amid a shifting global landscape and the rise of far-right, anti-women movements in Ireland and beyond. Urgent, sustained, cross-departmental action is needed, centred on meaningful engagement with and adequate resourcing of women's organisations, which play a vital role in shaping policy, legislation, and services.





Coimisiún na hÉireann  
um Chearta an Duine  
agus Comhionannas  
Irish Human Rights and  
Equality Commission

## Grant Funded

This project has received funding from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Grants Scheme as part of the Commission's statutory power to provide grants to promote human rights and equality under the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

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