

Pre-Budget Submission 2024: The Women's Budget

Budget 2024 presents an extraordinary opportunity to support women, advance gender equality, and invest in services which improve outcomes for all women and girls living in Ireland. The cost-of-living crisis, previous cuts of austerity, the Covid-19 pandemic, alongside the ongoing climate crisis continue to impact women disproportionately hard. The only way to build a sustainable economy is to build an equitable one, and this cannot be done without tackling gendered economic inequalities.

Budget 2024 must prioritise the delivery of Universal Public Services – in particular the provision of public childcare, supports which advance the elimination of violence against women, and the eradication of poverty including through the development of a social protection system which ensures no one is without the resources to live a decent life. Budgetary measures should also focus on investment in universal health services, housing supports for women, climate justice and promoting women's leadership and participation. This Budget should avoid income tax cuts for higher earners and instead aim to support the most marginalised in society.

We have the resources; now is exactly the time to invest in the future – and in an equal, sustainable, feminist Ireland.

Ten Key Asks for Women in Budget 2024

- 1. Deliver a Universal Public Childcare Model**
- 2. Invest in Zero Tolerance to Violence Against Women**
- 3. Increase and Benchmark Social Protection and Pension Rates**
- 4. Provide Free Contraception and IVF**
- 5. Invest in Gender-Sensitive Mental Health Services**
- 6. Support Women Seeking Justice After Violence**
- 7. Provide Housing for Women**
- 8. Establish a Statutory Child Maintenance Agency**
- 9. Invest in Feminist Climate Justice**
- 10. Fund Women's Participation and Leadership**

1. Deliver a Universal Public Childcare Model

Deliver a universal public model of childcare, and cut childcare costs for families by a further 25% in Budget 2024

Lack of affordable childcare is the biggest barrier to women's equal participation in society. While the investment in last year's Budget in the childcare sector was a very welcome start to reducing fees for parents, childcare costs are still unaffordable for many. International evidence shows that a public, not-for-profit, childcare model is the best way to ensure access to affordable, quality childcare for families and decent pay and conditions for workers.

2. Invest in Zero Tolerance to Violence Against Women

Fully cost and allocate ring-fenced funding for the implementation of the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (DSGBV) and ensure the new DSGBV Agency is adequately resourced to provide sufficient funding for frontline services

2023 has been characterised by an epidemic of violence against women. From the beginning of 2022 to date, 18 women died violently, and in the first quarter of 2022, domestic abuse calls and incidents were 13% higher than the same period in 2021. The Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, published in 2022, provides a strong blueprint for the elimination of violence against all women and girls in Ireland. The commitment set out in the Strategy to establish an integrated whole-of-government national response through the creation of a new statutory agency will be critical to its full and effective implementation. NWC calls for a firm budgetary commitment to fully realise this ambitious Strategy.

3. Increase and Benchmark Social Protection and Pension Rates

Establish the Minimum Essential Standard of Living as the benchmark for social protection payments by 2026 and increase social protection and pension rates by at least €25 in Budget 2024

While Budget 2023 included one-off payments which will have helped to support women and families through last winter, an over-reliance on this form of non-core spending will not protect women from poverty, or tackle income and wealth inequality in the long-term. Secure, predictable increases in social protection that ensure a minimum standard of living for all are needed. As women are more likely to be in low paid, part time jobs on precarious contracts, this makes it difficult to collect sufficient PRSI contributions to be eligible for the full Contributory State Pension – it is NWC's view that a universal state pension is the best way to support women and those who encounter barriers to the labour market, including disabled people, carers, lone parents, Travellers and Roma.

4. Support Women Seeking Justice After Violence

Resource court and non-court support for victim-survivors reporting domestic and sexual abuse, including free legal advice, training programmes for those coming into contact with victims-survivors, and resource an increase in the number of judges, in line with the OECD and the Judicial Planning Working Group report

Recent research commissioned by the NWC and the Department of Justice highlighted the urgent need for reforms in the justice system for victim-survivors reporting domestic and sexual abuse. The current system means that many victim-survivors are forced to navigate three separate legal systems, with onus on the victim-survivor to navigate them simultaneously, causing significant trauma and revictimisation.

5. Provide Free Contraception and IVF

Continue the roll-out of the universal free contraception scheme, targeting women aged 30-35 in the next stage, and allocate ringfenced funding to develop the Assisted Human Reproduction Regulatory Authority and expand access to public tertiary infertility services, including IVF

Free contraception for women aged 17-30 is a welcome development and must be built on to ensure access for all ages, so all women have real contraceptive choice and access to the most effective forms of contraception. The allocation of €10m to commence publicly funded IVF in September 2023 was a landmark moment for women and couples – Budget 2024 must continue this progress. Further funding will enable a meaningful expansion in access to these essential services and expedite delivery of a fully public model.

6. Invest in Gender-Sensitive Mental Health Services

Invest in mental health so that all women and girls have access to gender-sensitive mental health services, including the delivery of a Mother and Baby Unit

Government must increase, on a phased basis, mental health funding to 10% of the overall health budget, in line with Sláintecare. It is also imperative that the reinstatement of a national lead for mental health within the HSE is achieved to ensure strategic and budgetary oversight and leadership to reform Ireland's mental health system, as envisaged in Sharing the Vision. This includes the development of gender sensitive mental health services, which appropriately meet the needs of all women and girls. Despite commitments to develop Ireland's first Mother and Baby Unit, there has been no allocation of funding to progress this – this must be included in Budget 2024.

7. Child Maintenance Agency

Establish a statutory Child Maintenance Agency through the provision of multi-annual funding and ensure the State assumes liability for child maintenance

Child maintenance plays an important role in protecting against poverty, and research shows that where child maintenance is a reliable source of income, there can be a 30% reduction in the poverty gap. A 2022 survey of lone parents in Ireland found that only 35% are receiving maintenance without arrears. A statutory agency would remove child maintenance from the adversarial court system, reducing the burden on women to litigate for child maintenance orders.

8. Provide Housing for Women

Increase investment in State-led public, affordable and cost rental housing, and provide a minimum of 1 refuge space per 10,000 population

The housing and homelessness emergency continues to have a devastating impact on women and families throughout Ireland. Lone parent families, 86% of whom are headed by women, make up 70% of families made homeless since the ending of the eviction ban in March 2023. There is an urgent need to establish domestic violence refuge accommodation units in every county and meet the requirements under the Istanbul Convention. We need housing policy that delivers secure, affordable accommodation for all and leaves no one behind.

9. Invest in Feminist Climate Justice

Increase research capacity to analyse the gendered effects of energy/transport poverty and invest in public/active transport infrastructure, emphasising rural investment, safety and accessibility

Transport and energy are not gender neutral. We need an inclusive approach to transport and energy infrastructure which ensures that all needs are catered for – those of women, disabled people, people in rural Ireland and all members of marginalised communities.

10. Fund Women's Leadership and Participation

Increase funding to the women's community sector to enhance women's leadership and participation, providing multi-annual funding for community organisations

Underinvestment in the community development sector and local women's organisations have exacerbated social exclusion across the island, and NWC members have experienced reduced capacity for collective action, political analysis and for grassroots community development that can address the persistent inequalities in local communities and support women's representation and participation.