

October 2020

**Submission to the
Department of Rural and
Community Development
on the Statement of
Strategy 2021-2023.**

Introduction

The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) on the shape and content of the Statement of Strategy 2021-2023. Established in 1973, the National Women's Council (NWC) is a feminist non-governmental organisation representing women and women's groups in Ireland. The NWC has 190-member organisations representing many different sectors, backgrounds and locations. As the representative organisation of women in Ireland, our mission is to achieve women's equality, empowering women to work together in order to remove structural political, economic, cultural and affective inequalities. The vision of the NWC is of an Ireland where all women and men have equal power to shape society and their own lives.

In this extraordinary time, the Department has the opportunity to take transformative decisions to support all those in decision and policy making structures at local level to name women's inequality, enhance their ability to address it and to firmly embed the principles of gender equality into the programmes, policies and practices of decision and policy making institutions at local level. This should be evident across all high-level goals and actions and all strategies that fall under the remit of the Department. NWC are looking forward to continuing to working with the Department to offer our support and expertise on advancing equality for women and to bring the voice and perspectives of our members.

This work is kindly supported by the Department of Rural and Community Development through the Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO) administered through Pobal.

Context of women's equality in Ireland today

Despite some progress, equality for women in Irish society has yet to be achieved. Underinvestment in public services and social infrastructure, combined with gender-blind policy-making and budgeting, have had a disproportionate economic and social impact on women in Ireland. In the context of COVID-19, women face unique risks of contracting the virus, and the pandemic will have long-term implications on the safety, wellbeing, and livelihoods of women.

- Women continue to carry the responsibility for care and care work in Irish society, diminishing their capacity to participate on an equal footing to men in all aspects of economic, social and

political life. The distribution of care work has not shifted between women and men and care work remains undervalued.

- Many of the critical decision-making areas in Irish society remain bereft of women. Women now make up 26% of councillors. The EU average is 32%. 16 councils across Ireland have less than 5 women councillors and the vast majority of these are county/rural-based councils. Gender balance in leadership roles in business, politics and public life is crucial to ensure accountability and responsiveness to women in all their diversity. Ensuring that the voices of women are heard in decision making and that their participation is supported and resourced at local level is key to tackling gender inequalities from the ground up.
- 1 in 4 Irish women had experienced a form of physical and/or sexual violence since the age of fifteen. The prevalence of violence against women in Irish society reflects how far we still have to go achieve full equality for women.
- Women have a marginally higher risk of poverty and experience a higher level of deprivation than men. Already vulnerable groups of women suffer greater impacts. 33.5 per cent of lone parent families (the vast majority of whom are headed by women) families were at risk of poverty in 2018. Ireland has one of the highest rates of overall female homelessness in Europe and the number of women being sent to prison has significantly increased from 155 female committals in 1995 to 1174 female committals in 2019.¹ Traveller and Roma women remain among the most excluded groups in the country. Women and families awaiting decisions on their asylum applications continue to endure unsuitable accommodation in the direct provision system.
- NWC would also like to highlight that women's experiences are shaped by the intersection of gender with other factors such as age, income, education, family status, membership of the Travelling community or other ethnic minority communities, disability, migration status, LGBTQI+, living in an urban or rural area and so on.
- Underinvestment in public services, the community development sector and local women's networks, along with the radical alteration of Ireland's equality infrastructure, have had drastic repercussions on the promotion and achievement of equality and exacerbated social exclusion, further isolating marginalised and disadvantaged women.

¹ <https://www.iprt.ie/women-offenders/>

Programmes and policy interventions

Rural Development

In a rural context, it has long been a concern that policies have focused predominantly on economic development in isolation from social development. Policies have failed to recognise, resource or support the diversity that, while now growing, has always been a part of rural society. There was no reference to women in the Charter for Rural Ireland published in 2016.²

Economic dependency, isolation, unequal opportunity and participation are compounded by the problems of distance from services and amenities. The absence of an adequate transport service and affordable childcare services in many areas make it difficult for women to avail of training and education or to enter into or retain employment. Experiences of rural poverty can manifest differently for women. Irish Rural Link and Longford Womens Link have clearly articulated the particular disadvantages experienced by women in rural communities.³ These include access to public services, lack of transport, fuel poverty, access and cost of childcare, eligibility for activation and employment supports and the stigma associated with accessing supports around mental health and domestic violence, if and when these services are available. Within rural communities, the diversity of women must be recognised, including the multiple discrimination experienced by disabled women, older women, migrant women and Traveller and Roma women and women on low incomes.

Policies and programmes designed to support women's engagement in rural development programmes and decision-making structures need to take account of the demands on women's time and create the conditions for equal participation. All of these structures should be required to publicise and make available data on women's representation. Where a deficit exists, an action plan needs to be developed to address the imbalance within an agreed timeframe. It is unclear what level of scrutiny is applied to decision making processes to distribute social inclusion funding, in order to ensure equal access for less powerful or more diverse groups.

² https://www.chg.gov.ie/app/uploads/1970/01/charter_for_rural_ireland-1.pdf

³ Irish Rural Link (2016) Poverty and Social Inclusion: the case for Rural Ireland <http://www.irishrurallink.ie/category/press-events/events/>

There must be a strong commitment to reaching gender parity across all decision-making arenas in local and community life including sporting, farming, local and community development organisations.

Action Plan on Rural Development

The Action Plan on Rural Development is the key government policy on realising the potential of rural Ireland. However, there is a significant lack of gender analysis and mainstreaming in the current plan. It is imperative that, in any rural development strategy, women are counted as being part of rural Ireland. Women who experience poverty and social exclusion must be specifically named and targeted to benefit from the development and investment that will result from the strategy's implementation. NWC welcomes the state support for women entrepreneurs pioneering and innovating through the Accelerating the Creation of Rural Nascent Start-ups (ACORNS), a programme developed to assist start-up female entrepreneurs residing in a rural area. It has supported 250 women entrepreneurs over the course of the strategy. This should be further developed to support women from marginalised backgrounds to access the programme. Due to the many challenges facing women setting up enterprises, they tend to favour smaller businesses in gendered, often seasonal and precarious sectors such as craft, hospitality and catering.⁴ The ability to take up full time paid employment or enterprise opportunities is directly related to the availability of childcare, eldercare, transport, domestic and family responsibilities and these must be factored in. The plan also has made commitments to supporting enterprise and employment through the development of incubation spaces and innovation hubs. They have the potential to foster access for women to flexible and decent employment opportunities in other sectors such as information technology. There are opportunities for greater investment in Digi hubs with onsite childcare that would be accessible for parents and provide greater flexibility among employers.

However, in the latest six-monthly progress reports, there is no specific reference to actions targeting women or gender specific indicators related to the Green Low-Carbon Agri-Environment Scheme (GLAS), fisheries or rural social scheme places.⁵ The numbers of women participating in GLAS are much lower. In 2018, out of 11,633 places, 1,426 places were taken by women. Only 20% of participants on the Rural Social Scheme are women.

⁴ Unravelling the strands of 'patriarchy' in rural innovation: A study of female innovators and their contribution to rural Connemara Aoife M. Ní Fhlatharta, Maura Farrell

⁵ <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/b13c5f-progress-reports-action-plan-for-rural-development/>

We await the publication of the next action plan and we would welcome the opportunity to develop specific gender indicators with the Department. We call for gender expertise to be included on the monitoring group for the next iteration of the plan. Gender disaggregated data should be published for all actions in the six-monthly progress reports. NWC believes that it is crucial to monitor the extent to which this key national programme impacts on equality for women in rural areas and to monitor the distribution of resources and outcomes for women. If the majority of targeted resources are directed towards traditional agricultural activities rather than broader rural social & economic development, it will be men that continue to directly benefit. While the promotion of equality between men and women may be a stated government commitment, it's the budgetary decisions and allocation of resources that shows whether that priority is matched by spending. Women's interests are affected by virtually all government spending not just the fraction of the budget allocated for specific programmes such as ACORNS.

Leader

A significant budget of 250 million was available for the period 2014-2020. It is vital that the needs and interests of marginalised and excluded women are supported through investment. Women are named as a particular group who are at risk of social exclusion under Theme 2, Social Inclusion and Provision of Services to hard to reach communities, and any allocation of resources should be based on seeking equal outcomes and impacts for men and women. The Department currently does not capture details of the amount of funding approved specifically for women's groups or other sectoral organisations. In many instances, Local Community Development Committees have taken on the role of Local Action Groups for the drawdown and appropriation of resources of the Leader programme.

Local Community Development Committees

NWC is concerned that a purely voluntary commitment to gender balance on LCDC's is not enough, as it is the primary participative and oversight structure for local development and community development work and the delivery of a growing number of funding programmes. Only eighteen out of thirty-one LCDCs have achieved a 40% or greater gender balance. There is no evidence of a plan on how to tackle this underrepresentation of women. It was noted in the review that was published in July 2019 that;

*"Achieving an appropriate gender balance across LCDCs remains challenging. This is monitored on an ad hoc basis by the Department; there are considerable disparities from one LCDC to another. The review has shown that almost 65% of reported LCDC membership is male, while in one LCDC 94% of members are male."*⁶

⁶ <https://assets.gov.ie/30330/cabe9d3122594e9ca02ad52d3fc8dc95.pdf>

The review also starkly highlighted that 58% of respondents said there was no equality proofing happening or that they did not know if it was. One of the recommendations is to develop and commission training for chief officers, staff and Chairs on a range of areas including gender balance and equality proofing. Gender balance can be achieved by making concrete national commitments on composition, function, terms of reference and standing orders of those committees and groups. Without establishing a baseline, a target and a plan to achieve gender parity on all decision-making structures, significant change will not be achieved or impact will not be measured.

Community Development

Community development has played an important role in enabling, supporting and facilitating the participation and empowerment of marginalised women, in a way that focuses on collective strategies for addressing social, economic, cultural and political inequalities. NWC welcomes the commitment to the definitions provided within Towards Standards to Quality Community Work: An All-Ireland Statement on Values, Principles and Work Standards in the Sustainable, Inclusive, Empowered Communities: A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland 2019-2024 to support the community and voluntary sectors and the values of community development underpinning that strategy.

In developing the implementation plan for the strategy, it must be recognised that women's equality is not a minority issue, but that the rights and needs of women cut across all sections of society. NWC considers community development to be a key strategy to facilitate marginalised and socio-economically disadvantaged women to enjoy full participation in public life and address inequality. The plan must include an explicit commitment to this end. It must recognise the role women and women's groups continue to play in the wider community and voluntary sector and in the social fabric of communities.

Public Participation Networks

Publication of gender disaggregated data in annual reports for the Public Participation Networks (PPNs) is to be welcomed and should continue. It would be important to build on this and increase the diversity of women represented from marginalised backgrounds. Gender balance has been achieved on a national level with PPN representatives on committees and boards however, regional variations do exist, these should be publicised and action taken. As has traditionally been the case, women tend to come from the Community and Voluntary sectors rather than other pillar sectors to achieve the gender balance. Commitments to supporting and reporting on women's participation and representation in the revised user guide and any future structural review are critical. Current

indicators measure the numbers of groups registered with the PPNs and the percentage of those in the social inclusion pillar.⁷ We must move beyond quantitative measurements and seek to deepen the engagement and influence of the membership. It should be considered how to develop and increase membership in the social inclusion pillar. Indicators could be established to measure the effectiveness of the structures to influence policy and decisions at a local level including exploring influence and participation, examining whether pathways to participation are open to women from underrepresented groups and increasing Traveller, migrant and young people's participation. In a recent Local Authority Satisfaction Survey 2020, only 34% of respondents believe that they can influence decisions affecting their area with regional variations from 56% in Offaly to 14% in Carlow.⁸

The independence and autonomy of the PPNs is critical to their legitimacy and their effectiveness in engaging the most marginalised communities. It is important that these structures contribute to women's access to decision making. The situation of women will not improve if their voices and expertise are diluted or remain unsolicited and unheard within these structures. In the implementation of local policies and structures, women's equality concerns must not be segregated, but must be integral to planning processes, policy development and programme delivery.

Local Development and Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme

Local Development Companies (LDC), independent not for profit companies, were commissioned through a competitive tendering process to deliver SICAP 2. There are 49 LDCs across the country, many based in rural areas. They operate and deliver a number of programmes including Local Employment Services, Jobs Clubs, Tus and the Rural Social Scheme. Gender equality is named as a cross cutting horizontal theme in the programme. LDCs can show strong leadership in meeting and exceeding the target for gender balance on their boards, supporting women in leadership roles as well as championing women's equality across their programmes. 32% of all board members of Local Development companies are women, with 10 women holding the chairperson roles compared to 34 men. 29% of chairpersons of LDCs are women.

We have many positive examples of targeted work across both rural and urban based companies with women including direct support to women's groups, specific programmes with women on low incomes and lone parents⁹ and supporting women to access free sanitary products.¹⁰ In 2018, 49% of

⁷ <http://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/NOAC-Performance-Indicator-Report-2018-1.pdf>

⁸ National Oversight and Audit Commission Local Authority Satisfaction Survey 2020
<http://dev-site.noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/NOAC-Satisfaction-Survey-2020.pdf>

⁹ <http://nekd.net/moving-on-project/>

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/redboxprojectbandon/photos/the-red-box-project-bandon-being-supported-by-margaret-murphy-omahony-td-in-band/2219190791679723/>

the total SICAP caseload were women, and women's groups were 7% of the total local community groups supported. A higher proportion of women receive lifelong learning supports compared to men who receive more employment supports.¹¹ However, marked variation is found across LDCs in the gender breakdown of individuals receiving support. Women formed more than half of participants in eight areas, most notably, Dublin Inner City and the area covered by IRD Duhallow. On the other hand, women made up only around a third of beneficiaries in Monaghan, Roscommon and Longford as well as Dublin North West.¹² A third of LCDs saw SICAP as effective or very effective in relation to gender equality. 35% of respondents felt they could not say how effective SICAP had been, particularly in relation to promoting gender equality and countering discrimination.¹³ The commitment in the National Strategy for Women and Girls is important in this regard, to integrate gender into all planning and processes and to take action where gender imbalance exists on boards and to ensure women can progress into leadership positions across all LDCs.¹⁴

Commissioning and Public Procurement

Commissioning should not be seen as a replacement for the need or duty for public delivery of public services or the democratic importance of community development and participation. It is important that not-for-profit organisations that not only provide services, but also make a wider social and economic contribution within their communities, including in some cases, through a research, policy or advocacy role, should be protected and supported rather than undermined by national procurement process. Specific measures should be put in place to support this and to ensure that community and voluntary organisations are not disadvantaged in terms of the procurement processes, including through the active use of social considerations, criteria and clauses. Competitive tendering processes may favour larger entities to the detriment of smaller grassroots groups. Where public money is spent, it is absolutely essential that decent work, equality and wider benefits to the community be explicitly reflected and satisfied at all stages of the procurement process. Under commissioning processes, the contracting authority could include a requirement, to show how the bidders has demonstrated equality and diversity in their proposals and this could be subject to evaluation and awarding of marks.¹⁵ The needs of the community and the appropriate responses to those needs must be determined and assessed locally rather than centrally pre - determined and pre-

¹¹ Pobal(2018) SICAP Annual Report

¹² ESRI (2018) The goals and governance of the social inclusion and community activation programme (SICAP) 2015-2017: a mixed methods study

¹³ ibid

¹⁴http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/National_Strategy_for_Women_and_Girls_2017__2020.pdf/Files/National_Strategy_for_Women_and_Girls_2017_-_2020.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.communityworkireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/winnerslosersappendices-march-19th-2020.pdf>
Gender equality and the procurement process

defined programmes and targets. Equality and human rights can in no sense be considered as an optional add on but must run clearly through all aspects of public procurement policy and practice. Women predominate in the community and voluntary sector, it is essential to ensure ongoing gender sensitive consideration and consultation that engages with women as key users of public services. It is important that the option of grant giving outside of procurement processes constraints be sustained where that is a more appropriate approach. Recent research published by Maynooth University and Community Work Ireland called for more consideration and exploration on the longer-term impacts on service users and standards for staff.¹⁶ There is also a reference to the Social Inclusion and Community Activation programme in the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017 – 2020 on embedding gender equality in their processes with third parties.¹⁷

It is crucial that the department collects information on the final beneficiaries of projects and investments. It is important that such data is gender disaggregated and available for public scrutiny. Investment into organisations working to advance women’s equality must be protected from economic and budgetary cutbacks.¹⁸ To achieve the current mission “to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland”, policy and programme development should incorporate and align with the following frameworks and strategies.

United Nations Convention Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. It defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. In the Concluding Observations that arise as a consequence of Ireland’s examination under the Convention in early 2017, they recommended the following;

“The Committee recommends the State Party to ensure the integration of a gender perspective in the new Action Plan for Rural Ireland currently being developed and to provide information in its next periodic report on the overall situation of rural women highlighting the impact of the measures taken to improve on rural women’s land ownership and participation

¹⁶WINNERS AND LOSERS? The social marketisation of civil society. Scoping the impact of Commissioning and Procurement on civil society services and advocacy: public employment services, community development, domestic violence and housing first. By Mary Murphy, Ann Irwin, Michelle Maher March 2020

¹⁷ “Programme implementers (PIs) will also ensure gender equality is reflected in their own internal practises regarding their employees and relationships with sub-contractors and suppliers etc.”

¹⁸ <https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2020/08/IHREC-Submission-to-CEDAW-follow-up-to-Irelands-6th-and-7th-periodic-report.pdf>

in agriculture as well as access to social services including public transport childcare, health services, employment, education and training.”¹⁹

“The Committee urges the State party to take appropriate measures to restore funding for non-governmental organisations working in the field of women’s rights to enable them to continue to contribute to the implementation of the Convention.”

Public sector duty

The Department should continue to take into account when developing its new statement, the legislative implications for public bodies arising from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 which confers a positive duty to have regard to, in the performance of their functions, the need to ‘(a) eliminate discrimination, (b) promote equality of opportunity and treatment of its staff and the persons to whom it provides services, and (c) protect the human rights of its members, staff and the persons to whom it provides services’. Public bodies are required in their annual reports to report on related ‘achievements and developments’ pertaining to, for example, State obligations to prioritise the most marginalised and vulnerable in society and to ensure that women enjoy equality with men in public life. In that context, it is important that conditions are created to support meaningful participation and this participation informs development, implementation and reviews of policies and programmes. The Department should request and act upon support available from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and should ensure that all public bodies funded in local development, community development and rural development act to embed good practices in fulfilment of those responsibilities pursuant to this legislation into their daily operations.²⁰

- **Ensure that the Public Sector Duty is utilised to promote the mainstreaming of gender equality in all functions of the Department.**
- **Allocate a specific budget line for implementation of the Public Duty on equality and Human Rights and conduct a full Departmental Gender Audit.**

¹⁹https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2fIRL%2fCO%2f6-7&Lang=en

²⁰ <https://www.ihrec.ie/our-work/public-sector-duty/duty-assessment-tools-and-data-sources/>

National Strategy for Women and girls 2017 - 2020

The National Women's Strategy, the primary State policy document addressing key areas of concern for women and girls in Ireland, should act as a key reference point in the development of the statement of strategy. The publication can provide the Department with a solid stepping stone to significantly improve the advancement of women in local communities. The following commitments in the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017 – 2020 pertain to the Department and should be continue to be a key focus in the next strategic period of the Department;

- Action 4.14: Supports women's community organisations to identify relevant local structures for participation and to support the participation and progression of these women within these structures locally, regionally and nationally.
- Action 4.15: Undertake initiatives to promote the participation of Traveller and Roma women in leadership positions including in the community and voluntary sector.
- Action 4.6: In the context of supporting a greater focus on women's participation and on gender issues at community level, the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) will provide key supports to those most in need in our communities including disadvantaged women, Traveller and Roma women and women with disabilities, in all Local Authority areas throughout the country. Programme implementers (PIs) will also ensure gender equality is reflected in their own internal practises regarding their employees and relationships with sub-contractors and suppliers etc. This will depend on PIs reflecting on their human resources processes to tackle unconscious bias and to create a workplace where both women and men can advance into leadership positions.
- Action 6.9: Take gender equality into account in the implementation and monitoring of the Action Plan for Rural Development: Realising our rural potential 2017 – 2020.

Emerging challenges of Climate Action and Covid-19

Covid-19

In March as the country went into a state of emergency, the women's sector and NWC's grassroots member groups across the country were mobilised into action. It was immediately clear that the pandemic would have serious implications for women, which would need immediate response. Women are disproportionately represented as frontline workers in health, retail, community and domestic roles. School and childcare closures put extra pressure on many women to look after their families and loved ones, especially challenging for lone parents. Many women in precarious jobs before the pandemic were losing their jobs. Even before COVID struck, women were disadvantaged in the labour market with lone parents, disabled women, migrants and ethnic minorities, including Travellers, experiencing multiple barriers to employment. Women in abusive relationships were under lockdown with their abusers. The many older women living alone were cocooning and isolated, while women living in nursing homes were becoming particularly concerned about their health.

The pandemic has only brought into focus existing structural inequalities women experience in local communities, including those disproportionately impacting on minority ethnic groups, including Travellers and Roma, on people who are homeless and people living in overcrowded and unsuitable Direct Provision accommodation. Many of those who will be the hardest hit by Covid-19 were already struggling with the impact of ten years of cuts to public services and social welfare and have existing debt and low or no savings. In a pandemic, women and girls are most likely to take on the extra caring. Even if you aren't a healthcare worker, caring for the sick (whether it's in your own family or at a community level) is a job that generally falls to women. Again, this increases the risk of exposure and makes social distancing impossible. It also reduces a woman's ability to earn an income and often means that women are left to pick up the slack and take on additional housework. A recent CSO survey²¹ highlighted that women's well-being was being more adversely affected by the COVID-19 crisis.

The longer-term socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to exacerbate existing gender inequalities and intensify the socio-economic disparities faced by women in areas such as income and employment. Concerns exist over prolonged unemployment and migration, hospitality and tourism sectors finding it difficult to recover and particular rural and coastal counties bearing

²¹ Central Statistics Office. (2020, May, 19). Social Impact of COVID-19 on Women and Men: April 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/sic19wm/socialimpactofcovid-19onwomenandmenapril2020/>.

significant social and economic impacts.²² Those who have lost their jobs as a result of Covid-19 are more likely to be young, low-paid, women workers who were previously in part-time employment.²³ Isolation and loneliness have posed significant challenges for many people during this pandemic including: those living alone, in abusive situations, women from migrant backgrounds, lone parents and those with mental health problems who are living in rural areas. Combatting the social isolation experienced by women must be considered in all responses. Opportunities for socialisation have been severely curtailed in order to adhere to public health guidelines. Older people now collect their state pension on a fortnightly basis which reduces their social contacts. Fears were compounded around security and safety – many especially older women in rural isolated areas were fearful especially now callers and visitors are limited, they continue to feel very vulnerable. It was a challenge to support the continuation of treatment and recovery programmes including access to Methadone during Covid-19 in rural areas.²⁴ It has been extremely challenging for women experiencing domestic violence in seeking supports and safety. Phone calls to Women’s Aid increased by 39% and website hits increased by 74%.²⁵ According to Garda reports, domestic violence increased by almost 25% since the coronavirus lockdown period began, with higher spikes in some geographical areas.²⁶ Longford Womens Link reported a five-fold increase in domestic violence orders sought and a huge increase in contacts from women living in rural communities.²⁷.

There have been innovations during this crisis; where technology has been employed in new ways, to facilitate remote working, remote medical appointments and e-prescribing, including abortion care, which have provided good access for women in rural and marginalised populations. Remote working could offer new opportunities to revitalise and reinvigorate rural communities, if planned in a structured way.²⁸ The Covid 19 pandemic and the response by women’s community organisations clearly shows the importance of their role. We conducted a survey in June which captured the experiences of women’s community organisations. Many of our member organisations have responded in innovative ways to a multitude of complex and increasing needs including the welfare of staff. Their work during Covid-19 has included reaching out to combat social isolation and mental

²² <http://www.southernassembly.ie/uploads/general-files/CV19-Regional-Economic-Analysis.pdf>

²³ Coates, D., Byrne, D., Brioscú, A., Corcoran, D., Cronin, H., Keenan, E. and McIndoe-Calder, T. (2020). The Initial Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Ireland’s Labour Market. DEASP.

²⁴ Covid 19 NGO Group A joint Submission

²⁵ Mary Murphy (14th July 2020) ‘Gender Impacts of Covid-19 towards a gender sensitive recovery’ <https://www.tasc.ie/blog/2020/07/14/gender-impacts-of-covid19/>

²⁶ Lally, C. (2020, April, 27). Domestic violence reports up 30% in some areas since lockdown, says Garda. The Irish Times. Retrieved from <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/domestic-violence-reports-up-30-in-some-areas-since-lockdown-says-garda-1.4238362>.

²⁷ <https://www.shannonside.ie/news/local/longford/domestic-violence-incidents-increase-confinement-adds-pressure-longford-womens-link/>

²⁸ https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Remote_work_submission_NWC.pdf

health distress, moving programmes and supports online, organising and delivering vital supplies to many families across the country and providing emotional support to women. They have contributed to local planning and development of responses in a robust and effective manner in partnership with state agencies. Ongoing policy and community responses must actively engage with women and women's groups.

Additional flexible programme costs which do not require match funding to support organisations whose income has decreased and demand has increased should be made available including resources

- **to address technology deficits in organisations**
- **to provide safe and secure technological supports to women and families so they do not face additional isolation as we move between different levels of the crisis**
- **to enable organisations to respond in new ways whilst meeting public health regulations**
- **and additional supports for counselling services**

Climate Action

Ireland has become the second country in the world to declare a climate and biodiversity emergency. International research has established that as these climate impacts increase, existing inequalities, deprivation and exclusion will be worsened, with the worst impacts on women.²⁹ Our transition must be just and all measures must incorporate mitigation and climate justice investments to ensure rural communities, households experiencing energy poverty or lower socio-economic groups do not experience further inequality and poverty. Taking action against the issues faced in regards to climate change is necessary at the community, local, national, regional and international levels. Climate action is also, and perhaps mostly, necessary in terms of achieving gender equality. Having women in the position of decision-maker in terms of policy is the only way to have the response we need to make mitigation and adaptation strategies efficient and sustainable. Governments need to ensure policies and practices are in place to encourage women's participation. Any just transition programmes in rural areas must be gender proofed and factor in the experience of women working in industries that are closing down and the women who are part of the families that will be affected. When policy makers are considering and developing schemes for retraining workers in the midlands or in other areas where industries are being closed down, it must also be considered how to create decent and better paid employment opportunities for women and men. Climate mitigation strategies and actions must be cognisant of the following;

²⁹ European parliament-The Gender Dimension of Climate Justice 2015

- **Just Transition legislation policies & investment must be gender & poverty proofed**
- **Ensure that decisions on climate action are participatory, transparent and accountable**
- **Measuring the level of women's and men's awareness on women rights and rules for access to financial, natural and energy resources.**
- **Evidence that policies, strategies and plans are based on gender analysis of the different impacts of climate change on poor women and men, and include gender equality objectives for each sector of climate change adaptation and mitigation.**
- **Evidence that relevant sectoral sector policies, strategies, and plans require participatory approaches and the targeting of both women and men to use and manage low-carbon and climate-resilient solutions and technologies.**
- **Proportion of women in in senior management positions and in climate change decision making bodies**

Engagement with partners, stakeholders and the general public

Programmes and services designed based on a needs-based, evidentiary approach are more effective and cost-efficient. Decision-making processes informed by diversity have been found to be consistently more likely to find innovative solutions to foster inclusive growth. Consultation is a crucial element of the duties conferred on public bodies under Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014. International human rights mechanisms recognise that public participation rights encompass the rights to be consulted at each phase of legislative drafting and policymaking, to voice criticism and to submit proposals aimed at improving the functioning and inclusivity of all governmental bodies engaged in the conduct of public affairs. Public policies, programmes and services affect men and women differently and they will always affect those who were not considered in unexpected ways.³⁰ Mechanisms for engagement should be informed by and in line with the commitments in the Open Government Partnership National Action Plan and in the Consultation Principles & Guidance from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. It is crucial that any methods employed are effective in increasing participation and influence in policy making at local level. They must incorporate a diversity of views and experiences to ensure effective design of policies, programmes and budgets.

The Programme for Government – Our Shared Future – commits to social dialogue and creating new models of sectoral engagement. NWC are active members of the Community Platform, an alliance of 30 national networks and organisations in the community and voluntary sector working to address poverty, social exclusion and inequality. We recently published Valuing Social Dialogue which outlines the Values, Principles and Practice which should inform genuine and inclusive social dialogue. This is crucial if we are to move forward in a balanced way that strengthens our economy, our environment, our society and our communities to the benefit of everyone and leaves no-one behind.³¹

New policy and programme opportunities

We support the development of a new programme for autonomous community development to deliver on commitments in the Sustainable, Inclusive, Empowered Communities: A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland 2019-2024.³² The scoping and delivery of a sustainable funding model for the sector that addresses cost recovery and sets multi annual funding as the standard should be a key priority objective for the Department.

NWC notes the availability of funding for Women’s Sheds and welcomes the extension of funding.³³ However, we call for re-investment that is particularly focused on community development work with its social inclusion, anti- poverty and justice framework. There is no equivalent national affiliation for Women’s Sheds or clear criteria, which can cause difficulty in defining them.

Gender and Equality Budgeting

The NSWG contains a commitment to develop a process of budget and policy proofing as a means of advancing equality, reducing poverty and strengthening social and economic rights as well as ensuring the institutional arrangements are in place in government departments to support this work. The Revised Estimate 2020 provides for a budget of €308.25m for the Department of Rural and Community Development – comprising €158.25 million in current funding and €150 million in capital funding.³⁴ DRCD was not one of the departments that participated in the Gender and Equality Budgeting pilot project. However, given the Departments role in supporting inclusive and sustainable communities, it is particularly important that its resources are allocated in a way that promotes gender equality. While there is currently no statutory obligation on government departments to carry out gender and equality proofing, the OECD have included this in its recommendations to Ireland.³⁵ All government departments do have an obligation to promote equality under the Public Sector Duty.

- **DRCD Statement of Strategy should set out its plans to gender and equality proof its policy and budgetary decisions**

Measuring the performance of our supports and programmes

The fact that the statement will provide information on monitoring progress in achieving goals by identifying measurable outputs, outcomes and performance indicators is welcomed. In order to set goals, it is important to have gender disaggregated data to set gender equality indicators and to measure positive impacts and outcomes for women. Gender equality indicators are not simply a list of additional measurements, but rather sit alongside indicators designed to reveal other issues – socio-economic, environmental, rural, etc. – and are cross-cutting within existing frameworks. This would support better decision making and efficient use of resources and deliver better outcomes for

³⁰https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/A_Consultation_Checklist_for_Local_Community_Development_Committees_-_National_Womens_Council_of_Ireland.pdf

³¹ <https://communityplatform.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Valuing-Social-Dialogue-1.pdf>

³² <https://www.communityworkireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/investing-in-community-development-cwi-prebudget-submission.pdf>

³³ https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2020-06-16/946/#pq_946

³⁴ DRCD (2020). Ministerial briefing, June 2020.

³⁵ <https://www.oecd.org/gov/budgeting/equality-budgeting-in-ireland.pdf>

communities and will help identify the gender differentiated impact of the interventions. Without clear baseline gender disaggregated data, setting targets and indicators is more difficult and may result in over dependence on perception and speculation. Reaching out and investing in women and women's groups will provide the Department with a fuller, more substantial picture. For example, current indicators set for local government performance by the National Oversight and Audit Commission in relation to the Public Participation Network relate to numbers of groups registered with the PPN. It would be useful to develop more detailed indicators around the position of men and women within the structures, the level of engagement with civil society and the participation of marginalized groups such as Travellers. Self-reported indicators are also important; for example, how women feel about their own engagement and representation.

- **Use/establish enforcement mechanisms to complement gender targets or quotas in order to ensure compliance, such as a “comply or explain” rule on all local decision-making structures including local development companies and local community development committees**
- **Gender expertise required on all monitoring and implementation bodies**

Women in Leadership

The Department can through its competencies make explicit its commitment in its Statement of Strategy to gender balance among its employees.

Civil service

NWC acknowledges that while there has been considerable improvement from 2014, when women represented 25 per cent and 24 per cent at Deputy/Assistant Secretary General and at Secretary General levels, respectively, further commitment is needed if the State is to reach its 50:50 gender target as laid out in the Civil Service Renewal Programme. Overall, 58 per cent of the Civil Service is made up of women, only 18 per cent hold the position of secretary general in Government departments. Women are still less likely to apply for Assistant Secretary of Secretary General positions.³⁶

³⁶ Helen Russell, Emer Smyth, Selina McCoy, Raffaele Grotti, Dorothy Watson, Oona Kenny A study of gender in senior civil service positions in Ireland: Executive Summary December 2017

State boards

In July 2018, the 40% target was met for the first time in respect of average board membership, when women held 40.7% of the membership of State boards. In December 2018, the average gender balance across all State Boards stood at 41.5% female and 58.5% male members. However, less than half of individual Boards had met the 40% target. It has been recommended that Ministers are to be informed of the gender balance on State Boards at the time of making further appointments. The statement of strategy must reference the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies: Annex on Gender Balance, Diversity and Inclusion³⁷

Recommendations

1. A specific, explicit focus and naming of women's social, economic, cultural and political equality and, in particular, the equality of marginalised women needs to be an overarching and underpinning principle of all the structures, functions and programmes associated with the Department.
2. The community development sector, including women's groups, require increased support and resources to enable it to carry out all the functions pertaining to the approach including research, advocacy and campaigning work.
3. There must be recognition of the legitimacy of the sector as an independent voice for change and the introduction of a funded programme for autonomous community development as a means to address social exclusion and inequality.
4. Not-for-profit organisations should be protected and enabled rather than undermined by national procurement processes by embedding specific measures such as social considerations, criteria and clauses.
5. All policy/steering groups responsible for decisions on community development, local development and rural development – including Local Community Development Committees, Strategic Policy Committees and all relevant decision-making arenas – should achieve a 40% quota of women representatives who can contribute to an equality lens that considers women living in poverty or social/ geographic isolation.
6. Outcomes and impacts for women need to be measured across all programme investment
7. A comprehensive gender audit and composition of all decision-making structures should be carried out.

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³⁷ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8e884-code-of-practice-for-the-governance-of-state-bodies-annex-on-gender-balance-diversity-and-inclusion/>

