

March 2024

Submission on the European Semester and Ireland's National Reform Programme

Introduction

The National Women's Council (NWC) is the leading national representative organisation for women and women's groups in Ireland, founded in 1973. We have over 190 member groups and a large and growing community of individual supporters. The ambition of the National Women's Council is an Ireland where every woman enjoys true equality and no woman is left behind.

The National Women's Council welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Department of the Taoiseach on Ireland's National Reform Programme as part of the EU Semester.

As per the scope of the consultation, this submission seeks to outline NWC's views on:

- Major economic, employment and social developments and challenges for Ireland through a particular gender lens;
- Role of existing Government policies within the National Reform Programme, including the Climate Action Plan, National Development Plan, Housing for All and Sláintecare and their impact on women and girls;
- Ireland's obligations under the Sustainable Development Goals and the implementation of the Euro Pillar of Social Rights; and
- Ireland's response to the Country Specific Recommendations.

Priorities for Ireland's National Reform Programme

The cost-of-living crisis, previous cuts of austerity, the Covid-19 pandemic, and 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.

Women continue to have lower incomes, less wealth, fewer resources, all while shouldering the greater share of unpaid care responsibilities. Women are more likely to be in low paid work and are paid less than their male counterparts due to the gender pay gap. Lone parents, the vast majority of whom are women, are particularly disproportionately affected by these inequalities, as are many other marginalised women including Traveller and Roma women, migrant women and disabled women.

Key to tackling structural gender inequalities is government investment in public services and social infrastructure. This is necessary for advancing women's equality in Ireland and for the evolution of our society into a fair and equitable one.

The National Reform Programme 2024 (NRP) must lay the groundwork for a significant, sustainable and ongoing investment in public services and social infrastructure. It must ensure a balanced, inclusive and green plan for the future by shifting the focus from propping up low-paid work to supporting decent, well-paid jobs. Crucially, policy and economic decisions must be gender- and equality-proofed to ensure that public spending delivers public good for all.

NWC's submission sets out our recommendations as to how reform and investment through the NRP could deliver a more equal and inclusive Ireland and tackle the structural inequalities that women experience. NWC recognises the importance of raising revenue so that Ireland has sufficient resources for investment - and of gender and equality proofing spending and revenue raising decisions, so this submission finishes with NWC's proposals on revenue raising and begins with the importance of gender and equality proofing the National Reform Programme.

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Gender and Equality-Proof the National Reform Programme

Social and wealth inequalities, including those based on gender, are among the biggest economic and social challenges we face. The National Reform Programme 2024 presents a significant opportunity to close these gaps, and build a fairer and more equitable country.

To do so, the National Reform Programme must be gender- and equality-proofed. With significant increases in state expenditure in recent budgets, record corporation tax revenue, and the announcement of the creation of two long-term state funds at the last Budget to build sustainable investment into the future, it is essential that we ensure that such investment promotes equality rather than further embedding or exacerbating existing inequalities.

Comprehensive gender and equality budgeting must encompass equality for diverse groups of people, and must not be restricted to only analysis of the impact of already-decided measures – rather it must be instrumental in shaping the design of both tax and expenditure measures. It must take into account how intersecting oppression and discrimination impacts on different women’s experiences of a policy or budgetary decision in a way that actively seeks to reduce inequalities.

The Equality Budget Analysis of Budget 2024 focuses on the provision of information and analysis of the impact of policies rather than in the design of policies themselves – though the recognition that work on the integration of equality concerns into the tax system is ongoing is to be welcomed¹. Commitments to include gender and equality proofing across Government policies and programmes must form a key part of the new National Strategy for Women and Girls, following on from its inclusion in the previous iteration which ran out in 2020.

Critically, Government must develop and implement a new National Strategy for Women and Girls, in line with the report of the Citizen’s Assembly on Gender Equality. The development of a new strategy is an opportunity to further develop and progress key actions for women and girls on a range of issues and significantly advance gender equality. Fundamentally, this will require enhanced collaboration with key stakeholders, robust implementation and monitoring mechanisms, development of clear actions and indicators and allocation of appropriate resources.

Deliver Universal Basic Services

Ireland currently compensates for our high market income inequality by significant redistribution through taxes and social transfers. This has led to reduced investment in quality, universal, public services.² As a result, we have deficits in our public services, including but not limited to: a housing crisis; a two-tier health system; and ongoing crises in the provision of and access to childcare. Essential services like these need to be placed outside the market and delivered on a public basis.

The National Women’s Council has consistently called for sustained investment in public services as the most effective way to tackle gender inequalities, and care services are a vital part of that.

The provision of Universal Basic Services (UBS) is the most effective way to meet society’s collective needs. Investment in UBS is an investment in a properly functioning and equal society and economy, and indeed, these services are essential assets when crises like pandemics strike. The priority in the National Reform Programme should be to move towards a system of UBS by focusing on:

- **Care:** investment in public models of social care, and early childhood education and care
- **Health:** investment in universal healthcare

¹ Government of Ireland (2023) [Budget 2024: Beyond GDP – Quality of Life Assessment](#)

² Mary Murphy et al (2020) The High Road Back to Work

- **Housing:** investment in public, affordable, and cost-rental housing
- **Feminist Climate Justice:** ensure climate and environment policies are gender-proofed

Care

Early Years Education and School Age Childcare

- **Deliver a fully publicly-funded and provided universal model of Early Years Education and School Age Childcare**
- **Increase investment in Early Years Education and School Age Childcare to 1% of national income (GNI*) by no later than 2030³**

Universal Social Care

- **Deliver a fully publicly-funded and provided model of universal social care services⁴**
- **Invest in a pay structure and benefits (including sick pay and pensions) for all care workers**
- **Provide a statutory right to home support and social care supports for disabled and older people**
- **Invest, through secure, multiannual funding, in disability services that are essential to the right to independent living, including Personal Assistant Services, home supports, alternative forms of respite and personalised budgets**

The pandemic reinforced the centrality of care to a functioning society and economy. However, care continues to be under-resourced, under-valued and under-acknowledged in society. Women continue to bear primary responsibility for unpaid care while workers in the sector are among the lowest paid in the economy, a key contributor to the gender pay gap.

The most effective and efficient way to tackle persistent gender inequalities in care is sustained investment in public services and social infrastructure, including a public early years education and school age childcare system, and universal adult social care. Investment in care has been shown to act as a better post-pandemic economic stimulus than investment in traditional economic recovery approaches, such as construction. Producing significantly less emissions than construction, care jobs are also green jobs so investment in care also helps us meet our goals on a low carbon economy.

Funding the care sector would generate significant economic growth in the domestic economy, which was more negatively impacted than the multinational sector by the pandemic. Because the sector is comprised predominantly of low paid women workers, investing in care could reduce the gender pay gap significantly (by an estimated 5% in a UK context⁵), helping to address gender equality and deliver better pay and conditions for the many migrant women in the sector.

NWC's feminist analysis of care includes not only the perspectives of the women who provide care but also the women who need supports and assistance. The absence of a sufficient state response to support disabled people to live independent lives forces them into a position of dependence and leaves family carers/supporters to provide often very high levels of care. Investment in ensuring universal access to support and assistance for older people and disabled people is vital to reduce dependence on family and friends and ensure autonomy and independence for all.

The Economic and Social Research Institute have noted that our long-term residential care system is increasingly reliant on a small number of profit-driven operators⁶, while the European Commission has noted that Ireland is over-reliant on institutional care, while home support, which is a key part of

³ In line with UNICEF target per recommendation 8 of [Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality Report](#) (2021)

⁴ Sweeney, R.; Singleton, S.; Murphy, E. (2022) [NWC submission to the Commission on Taxation and Welfare](#)

⁵ WBG (2020) [A care led recovery from Coronavirus](#).

⁶ ESRI (2024) [Changes and challenges facing the Irish long-term residential care sector since COVID-19](#)

long-term care services in many other EU Member States and is more efficient and appropriate for addressing much of our care need, has been historically underprovided.⁷

⁷ European Commission (2021) [Analysis of the recovery and resilience plan of Ireland](#)

Health

- **Accelerate progress towards a universal model of healthcare provision which appropriately meets the needs of all women and girls, including those most marginalised in society (Traveller and Roma women, disabled women, migrant women)**
- **Continue to resource the transition away from private provision in public hospitals, in line with recommendations in the de Buitléir report**
- **Develop and resource, through ring-fenced funding, phase 2 of the national Women's Health Action Plan with a focus on clear actions, indicators and robust implementation mechanisms to ensure the plan is realised in full**
- **Expand the universal contraception roll out so it extends across the whole of the reproductive age range**
- **Resource and implement the recommendations of the Independent Abortion Review⁸ to enhance access to services for women in all communities across the country. Provide abortion care for all who need it in Ireland and enact legislation to allow for safe access zones**
- **Establish a new woman-centred, state-of-the-art National Maternity Hospital which has its own governance and budgetary independence**
- **Invest in delivery of *Sharing the Vision* to ensure access to gender-sensitive mental health services across a continuum from primary and community supports through to acute and specialist services for women who need them**

The Sláintecare Progress Report 2022 identifies a number of challenges in advancing the strategy's vision of a universal health and social care system - where everyone has equitable access to services based on their need. The provision of universal healthcare is no doubt a feminist issue due to the structural inequalities that women face, in accessing timely healthcare that appropriately meets their needs. Because women have lower incomes and provide the majority of care, including to older members of their family, they are more reliant on public health services. Particular groups of women have poorer health outcomes and have less access to healthcare services, including, but not limited to: lone parents, asylum seekers, women experiencing homelessness, Traveller and Roma women, LGBTQI+ women, women who have grown up in or on the edge of state care, and disabled women.

It is of critical importance that the current Sláintecare Action Plan is implemented in full in order to accelerate progress on Sláintecare and advance real improvements on access, affordability and quality in Ireland's health and social care services. The pandemic further exposed significant gaps in our two-tier health service. The European Commission's assessment of Ireland's Recovery and Resilience Plan notes that Ireland remains the only country in Western Europe without universal access to primary care.⁹ The NRP provides an opportunity to escalate the implementation of Sláintecare and to deliver on CSR no.1 (2020), recommending that Ireland improve accessibility of the health system, strengthen its resilience, including by responding to health workforce's needs and ensure universal coverage to primary care.

Recent budgets have made some welcome investments in relation to women's health, including additional funding to ensure continued implementation of the National Maternity Strategy, measures to support women's health in areas such as cancer, mental health and social inclusion, an increase in investment in efforts to tackle period poverty, and expanded access to free

⁸ O' Shea, M. (2023) The Independent Review of the Operation of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018

⁹ European Commission (2021) [Analysis of the recovery and resilience plan of Ireland](#)

contraception for women up to 31 years of age.¹⁰ It is of the utmost important to continue and build on these developments to enable a meaningful expansion in access to these essential services and expedite delivery of a fully public model.

Despite, abortion provision being in since 2019, significant legal and operational barriers persist for women in accessing abortion care across the country. At least 860 women travelled from Ireland to the UK to access abortion since the Eighth Amendment was repealed. It is critical that the State implement in full the independent review on abortion and progress the development of abortion policy, in line with the independent expert analysis, including from the WHO as a fundamental aspect of reproductive healthcare.

Finally, Government must invest in the development of gender sensitive mental health services, including the expansion of specialist eating disorder services, trauma informed care, perinatal mental health and the reconfiguring of child and adolescent mental health services.¹¹ Despite commitments to develop Ireland's first Mother and Baby Unit, there has been no allocation of funding to progress this vital service. Increased investment in mental health is required (10% of the total health budget as recommended by Sláintecare) in addition to reinstatement of a national lead for mental health within the HSE to ensure strategic and budgetary oversight and leadership to reform Ireland's mental health system, as envisaged in Sharing the Vision, Ireland's national mental health policy.

¹⁰ NWC (2024) [Post-Budget Analysis Snapshot](#)

¹¹ An independent review of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State has said it cannot currently provide an assurance to parents or guardians in all parts of Ireland that their children have access to a safe, effective and evidence-based service. The report published in July 2023 by the then Inspector of Mental Health Services identified numerous failings in the system. These included a lack of governance in some areas; a failure to manage risk, a failure to fund and recruit key staff, and a failure to look at alternative models of providing services, when recruitment becomes difficult. Some teams were not monitoring antipsychotic medication, in accordance with international standards and the report notes that there are no national standards in place. The review found unacceptable variations in the number of children on waiting lists and the length of the waiting lists varied across Community Health Organisations. This resulted in a lack of staff to conduct therapeutic interventions. Some teams had no consultant psychiatrists and work was being covered by a number of different locums, which affected continuity of care.

Violence Against Women

- **Resource and fully implement, through allocated ring-fenced funding, the Third National Strategy on Domestic Sexual and Gender Based Violence**
- **Appropriately resource the new statutory agency on DSGBV to carry out its functions, and provide sufficient multi-annual funding to frontline services and supports**
- **Establish fully accessible domestic violence refuge accommodation units in every county, providing a minimum of 1 refuge space per 10,000 population**
- **Ensure women in prostitution have access to safety, health care, support and exit routes, in line with the Third National Strategy, including the provision of dedicated safe accommodation and access to housing**
- **Deliver in full a new objective, mandatory Social Personal Health Education (SPHE) curriculum for all schools which is inclusive of all students and is underpinned by a whole school approach to advance gender equality, transform young people's perceptions of gender and gender stereotypes and prevent gender-based violence**
- **Combat the harms of pornography on children and young people, particularly in relation to the normalisation of sexual behaviour based on misogynistic and violent models of sexual expectations and its impact on gender equality**
- **Enhance collaboration between the three legal processes/courts regarding domestic and sexual violence (Criminal Justice, Family Law and Child Care Processes)**
- **Resource court and non-court support for victims-survivors reporting domestic and sexual abuse, including free legal advice, training programmes for those coming into contact with victims-survivors and physical court environments**
- **Increase the number of judges, in line with the OECD and the Judicial Planning Working Group report to address one of the main causes of the court system delays and its attritional effect on victims-survivors**

The epidemic of violence against women continues to grow in Ireland. 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 Sexual Violence Survey 2022 from the Central Statistics Office also showed that 52% of women will have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime, and that the majority of women (79%) knew the perpetrator.

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. However, the appropriate resourcing of all relevant government departments to successfully implement the Third National Strategy is of crucial importance. Importantly, commitments under the Strategy by all responsible Departments need to be costed and made transparent so that the Strategy can be realised in full.

It is also essential that the new DSGBV agency plays a critical role in the development and coordination of a data strategy on DSGBV, robust monitoring mechanisms and is appropriately resourced to allocate sufficient funding to frontline services. Significant investment is required to increase the number of domestic violence refuge spaces available in the State, to ensure provision in communities across the country¹² and resource refuges to respond appropriately to the intersecting needs of all women and children.

¹² Domestic violence refuge spaces must be increased significantly from the current 181 units to the recommended 500 spaces (1 per 10,000), in line with Council of Europe guidelines. As of June 2023, there

Recent research¹³ highlights the urgent need for reforms across the justice system for victims-survivors reporting domestic and sexual abuse. Actions required by the State, include an expansion of training and support for professionals, free legal advice and investment in physical court environments to better meet the needs of victims-survivors. Critically, there is a need to increase the number of judges, in line with the OECD¹⁴ and the Judicial Planning Working Group report to address one of the main causes of the court system delays and its attritional effect on victims-survivors.

The Third National Strategy is ground-breaking in its recognition of the inherent violence and abuse of commercial sexual exploitation of women in the sex trade and the establishment of strategies to ensure those, primarily women, in prostitution have access to safety, health care, support and exit routes. Fully resourced services and supports for those who are in, or who wish to leave, prostitution is essential. The pathways should include but are not limited to financial and legal supports, regularisation of immigration status; access to housing (emergency and social housing) and social protection; education and training programmes; access to free healthcare including mental health supports, and access to justice.

Finally, it is of fundamental importance that the movement for gender equality is advanced through the State's education system and targeted measures are put in place to tackle the harmful impact of pornography on children and young people. The Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curricula has the potential to transform young people's perceptions of gender and gender stereotypes and prevent gender-based violence. It is critical that all schools are supported to deliver the SPHE cycles in full, that the curriculum is fully inclusive, taking account of the particular needs of minority and marginalised groups. Teachers must also receive ongoing training, and a whole school approach developed to embed the values of gender equality in the structures and ethos of the school.

were still nine counties in Ireland without any refuge provision. Despite the commitment in the Third National Strategy to bring the number of refuge units to 280 nationally, this will still fall far short of the Council of Europe guideline

¹³ O Egan, N. and O'Malley Dunlop, E. (2023) A Report on the Intersection of the Criminal Justice, Private Family Law and Public Law Child Care Processes in Relation to Domestic and Sexual Violence.

¹⁴ OECD (2023) Modernising Staffing and Court Management Practices in Ireland: Towards a More Responsive and Resilient Justice System.

Housing

- **Significantly increase investment in State-led housing for the provision of public, affordable and cost-rental homes**
- **Provide resources to gender-proof all homeless and housing strategies and budgets, and establish gender-sensitive support services for women living in homelessness**
- **Fully implement the recommendations of the Report of the 2019 Expert Group on Traveller Accommodation, including the establishment and full resourcing of a statutory Traveller Agency with powers to approve and enforce Local Authority accommodation**
- **Full resource work to implement the White Paper on ending Direct Provision**
- **Reconvene the family homeless prevention sub-group as part of the National Homeless Action Committee and, develop a family homeless action plan with targeted actions to prevent and address homeless among one parent families**
- **Commission the Housing Agency to carry out research on entry to and exit out of homelessness for families**

The housing and homelessness emergency continues to have a devastating impact on women and families throughout Ireland. Ireland has one of the highest rates of female homelessness in the EU with figures likely an underestimation as women living in refuge accommodation, direct provision and disabled people living in institutionalised settings are not included. In addition, women with children are more likely to move around, staying with family and friends rather than going to homeless accommodation in the early stages of homelessness.¹⁵ Traveller and Roma families forced to live on roadsides are also excluded from official statistics.¹⁶

Lone parent families, 86% of whom are headed by women, are the highest proportion of families living in emergency accommodation, the vast majority having been made homeless from the private rental sector.¹⁷ Family homelessness has increased by 210% since April 2021. At that time, there were 925 families in emergency accommodation and the latest published figures in January 2024¹⁸, shows an increase to 1,940 families. In Census 2022¹⁹, 17% of families were headed by a lone parent, however, in January, 56% (1,087) of families in emergency accommodation are one parent families. Women are more reliant on the social housing system. They are more likely than men to rent from a local authority or voluntary body and outside of single adults, lone parents are the most common family type on housing waiting lists.²⁰

CSR No. 2 (2020) includes a recommendation that Ireland increase the provision of social and affordable housing – while this was not raised with the same significance in the most recent set of CSRs, the issues associated with Ireland’s housing crisis continue. The European Commission’s assessment of Ireland’s RRF notes that homelessness and availability of affordable and social housing remain structural challenges in Ireland, with clear detrimental impacts on health equity and social cohesion.²¹ Ireland’s strategy remains over-reliant on the private sector – both to build homes to provide housing through the private rented sector. We need a housing policy that is gender proofed and delivers secure, affordable accommodation for all and which leaves no one behind.

¹⁵ Bretheron, J. and Mayock, P. (2021) [Women’s Homelessness \(European Evidence Review\)](#)

¹⁶ Cork and Kerry RTAWG (2022) [Traveller Homelessness \(A Hidden Crisis\)](#)

¹⁷ ESRI (2021) [Monitoring Adequate Housing in Ireland](#)

¹⁸ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report*, January 2024

¹⁹ CSO (2023) [Census of Population 2022 – Summary Results](#)

²⁰ The Housing Agency (2021) [Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2020 Key findings](#)

²¹ European Commission (2021) [Analysis of the recovery and resilience plan of Ireland](#)

Feminist Climate Justice

Gender, equality and poverty-proof all climate policies and investment

- Gender, equality and poverty-proof all climate policies and investment
- End harmful direct and indirect state fossil fuel subsidies

Invest in a Just Transition for Women

- Prioritise establishment and resourcing of the overdue Just Transition Commission – and centre the voices of women, incorporating issues such as the valuation of care work
- Expand approaches and incentives to diversify, care for and restore climate and biodiversity-friendly land use, farm practices and food production²²

Invest in safe, accessible, low-carbon public + active transport infrastructure

- Invest in research into sustainable mobility to incorporate a gender analysis of public and active transport into transport planning and investment
- Prioritise and increase investment in public transport and active travel infrastructure, with emphasis on rural transport and making transport safer, more accessible and low-carbon

Deliver Energy Justice

- Target and increase investment in retrofitting schemes and measures, prioritising those vulnerable to energy poverty, particularly lone parents, the Traveller and Roma communities, older women living alone, disabled women and carers
- Develop research capacity to analyse the gendered effects of energy poverty
- Set clear targets for reducing energy poverty in the National Energy Poverty Action Plan

The transition to a carbon-neutral, sustainable economy – “from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy”²³ – presents an extraordinary opportunity to reduce social inequalities and to transform our society into one that is fair, equitable, strong and caring.

Women are more likely to be hardest hit by the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, in Ireland and across the world.²⁴ Climate breakdown/crisis mitigation and adaptation policies and associated investment have gender-differentiated impacts, and they can be powerful instruments for tackling social as well as environmental inequalities – but only if they are gender, poverty and equality proofed. Investment in care and social infrastructure must be central to the green transition. Care work is green work, and must be a core part of a regenerative and distributive new economic model and society.

As noted in the European Commission’s assessment of Ireland’s RRP²⁵, Ireland lags behind our EU peers on achievement of SDG 13 (climate action) since emissions trends are not in line with our climate objectives. Meeting our targets under SDG 13 must also be seen as an opportunity to advance SDG 5 (gender equality). The Climate Action Plan’s lack of engagement with the gendered impacts of climate and environment policies and challenges in Ireland must be tackled.

²² Environmental Pillar, Stop Climate Chaos (SCC) and Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) (2021) [Towards a New Agricultural and Food Policy for Ireland](#)

²³ Climate Justice Alliance (2023) [Just Transition: A Framework for Change](#)

²⁴ European Parliament (2015) [The Gender Dimension of Climate Justice](#)

²⁵ European Commission (2021) [Analysis of the recovery and resilience plan of Ireland](#)

Ensuring An Adequate Standard of Living for All Women

- **Establish a minimum essential standard of living benchmark for social protection payments**
- **Deliver targeted supports to women most at risk of poverty – including but not limited to lone parents, Traveller women, disabled women and those living in Direct Provision**
- **Introduce a universal State Pension system to guarantee income adequacy in older age**
- **Acknowledge the previous injustice of the ‘marriage bar’ with a once-off, ring-fenced retrospective scheme**

Our work and social protection systems were built for a different era and based on a largely male breadwinner understanding of both the labour market and social protection systems – resulting in significant gender gaps in income, wealth, pensions, and access to employment and state supports.²⁶

Women bore the brunt of decisions to cut social protection payments during the austerity years because women are more likely than men to be lone parents, to be outside the paid labour market because of unpaid caring responsibilities, and to benefit more from child-related supports.²⁷ The gendered structural inequalities in our labour and social protection systems are compounded further by the cost-of-living crisis, the pandemic, and the climate crisis, which all continue to impact women disproportionately hard.

While Budget 2023 included one-off payments which will have helped to support women and families through last winter²⁸, 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. The increase in base social protection rates in last year’s Budget was not enough to offset a real drop in the pension rate and in working age payments.²⁹ Lone parents and couples in retirement benefited relatively less from Budget 2023 than other household types. Women are less likely to benefit from the change in income tax bands in last year’s Budget, as it benefits high earners³⁰ and women are less likely than men to earn more than €50,000 per year, and almost half of women earn less than €20,000 a year.³¹

We need a social protection system that can support all women to achieve a minimum essential standard of living³², now and into the future. This baseline level of social protection support must be operated in tandem with improved public services infrastructure – to provide a state support system that both supports incomes and provides universally accessible public services.

A cross-departmental approach to all of these issues is essential to developing a state support system that ensures an adequate standard of living for all women. All budgeting decisions under each department – including but not only those addressing poverty, pensions, child supports, and employment – must be gender and equality proofed. Equality budgeting should be put on a statutory footing, and each Department should publish along with future budgets a gender equality impact statement with disaggregated data highlighting the impact on ethnicity, disability and other equality grounds.

²⁶ National Economic and Social Council (2022) [Ireland's Social Welfare System. Gender, Family and Class](#)

²⁷ Doorley, K. et al (2018) [The Gender impact of Irish budgetary policy 2008-2018](#). Dublin: ESRI.

²⁸ NWC (2022) [Budget 2023 reaction press release](#)

²⁹ NWC (2022) [Post-Budget 2023 analysis](#)

³⁰ ESRI (2022) [Distributional impact of tax and welfare policies: Budget 2023](#)

³¹ Central Statistics Office (2020) [Women and Men in Ireland 2019](#)

³² Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2023) [Minimum Essential Standard of Living](#)

A new model of decent work

- **Address the gender pay and pensions gaps**
- **Deliver a Living Wage**
- **Recognise and value unpaid work as a meaningful contribution to society and invest in care as a key element of Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP)**
- **Improve employment outcomes for all women, through enhanced pay and conditions including across the care and community sectors (where women are disproportionately represented, and work is insecure and low paid)**
- **Improve paid family leave entitlements to enhance the balance between work, family, social and community life and to shift towards a more gender equal burden of unpaid care responsibilities**
- **Ensure childcare supports, part time and remote opportunities are available to participants seeking active labour market supports**
- **Support the transition to a four-day working week**
- **Support women to access programmes in STEM areas**
- **Invest in community based and community development approaches to ALMP**
- **Recommit Pathways to Work to focusing on the most marginalised groups. This includes development of the Traveller and Roma Training, Employment and Enterprise Strategy in a timely fashion to combat the chronic unemployment levels impacting Traveller and Roma women**
- **Attach social criteria, clauses and conditionality to government procurement processes**
- **Legislate for collective bargaining rights across the labour market, including in industries with a high level of female employment, in order to raise wages and improve working conditions**

The current employment and social protection system does not properly recognise and value care responsibilities, which alienates many women from the labour market and limits their participation at varying levels. Lone parents, migrants and ethnic minority women, Traveller and Roma women, disabled women and young women also experience heightened barriers to labour market participation. It is imperative that the State create the conditions in which women can access decent, secure work that is also compatible with care responsibilities. This includes enhanced flexible working and family leave entitlements.³³

Furthermore, for many women, paid work is no guarantee of income adequacy with women predominating in low paid and precarious work. The Living Wage remains significantly beyond the National Minimum Wage.³⁴ Addressing the inadequacy of the minimum wage and closing the gender pay and pension gaps contribute to gender equality. The EU Commission have estimated that Ireland's gender pay gap could decline by almost 10% if the minimum wage were to reach 60% of median wages.³⁵

³³ Payments for family leave in Ireland are much lower than EU norms and there is a larger gap between the end of paid leave and the start of early years education services. Payments in most OECD countries offer at least 50% of average earnings, with many offering 100%, while in Ireland less than a third of average earnings are replaced. Family leave payments must be increased and linked to earnings to keep up with inflation but also to begin the process of bringing payments more in line with EU norms.

³⁴ Living Wage Technical Group (2024) <https://www.livingwage.ie/>

³⁵ EU Commission (2020) [COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT IMPACT ASSESSMENT](#)

Supporting women, and particularly the most marginalised women, requires a greater tailoring of active labour market policies toward the needs of women and this is best achieved through community-based and community development services and programmes.

Collective bargaining is one of the most effective ways to create more equal redistribution of wealth, reduce inequality and address low pay. Countries with a high coverage of collective bargaining tend to have shorter working hours for both women and men, more flexible work options under secure employment conditions, better protection for non-standard workers, as well as a reduced gender pay gap. However, the proportion of employees covered by collective bargaining agreements in Ireland is low and legislation is required to address this.

It is critical for women that the State takes the appropriate measures through the transposition of the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages to enhance collective bargaining rights through a robust national action plan on collective bargaining coverage. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission's in its July 2023 policy statement on care recommends that the State take immediate action to address the ongoing absence of a statutory right to collective bargaining, and adopt measures to increase trade union membership across the care sector. It is of fundamental importance that the State enhance collective bargaining across the labour market, particularly in industries with a high level of female employment, in order to raise wages and improve working conditions.

The public sector is an important employer for women, however, Ireland's public sector accounts for a much smaller proportion of employment (15%) than other small open economies in Northern Europe (25-30%). Countries with larger public sectors employ more women and also tend to have the largest (unionised) female participation rates in the labour force.³⁶ Therefore, investment in public services delivers on multiple fronts for women.

Public procurement can be a key lever in driving better terms and conditions for workers. Public procurement policies can promote decent work by making public contracts only available to those companies that pay decent wages, are addressing their gender pay gap, respect workers' right to collective bargaining and are committed to sustainability.

COVID-19 provided us with a unique opportunity to reexamine our approach to work to ensure it is sustainable into the future – measures like a four-day week would help to facilitate a more equal distribution of care between women and men. As founding members of the Irish campaign for a 4 Day Week³⁷, NWC advocates for this transition to a modern work model for the benefits for workers, business and the environment.

Overall, Government must support women to access decent work opportunities, and all labour activation policies must be gender and equality-proofed.

³⁶ Regan, A. (2020) Time for a serious political debate on fiscal reform

³⁷ fourdayweek.ie (2024) <https://fourdayweek.ie/>

Women in Rural Communities

- **Ensure that all rural development strategies and policies are gender and equality proofed**
- **Provide multi annual funding for independent community development in rural communities**
- **Secure generational renewal and recognition for women farmers**

The European Commission's assessment of Ireland's RRF notes that regional disparities are a key challenge for Ireland.³⁸ It has long been a concern that rural development 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. The development of rural policies and programmes must reflect the realities of women's experience; women are more likely to be poor, to parent alone, to be the main provider of unpaid care work, to be in precarious employment, to earn low wages and to be at risk of domestic or sexual violence. 'Our Rural Future' the current Irish rural development strategy, makes no reference to gender-based violence in rural communities. During the pandemic, domestic violence increased by almost 25% since the coronavirus lockdown period began, with higher spikes in some geographical areas. There are currently 9 counties in Ireland with no refuge spaces at all.

Women face particular barriers to participation in public and political life in rural communities. 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. Without adequate public transport provision, car ownership is a necessity adding to the cost of living and environmental concerns. The cost of a 'minimum essential standard of living' (MESL) was higher for rural households compared with their urban counterparts. This is especially high for older women living alone and lone parent households with teenage children.

Women's work on farms continues to be undervalued. The number of family farms owned by women in Ireland is at a very low rate at 11.7%. 31% of women farmers are over 80 years of age. Only 8% percent of the €1.2 billion of Ireland's EU CAP Single Farm Payments went to women farmers in 2012. Investment and targeted action can provide a real opportunity to support women in agriculture, countering the perception that farming is a male occupation and shifting the cultural bias from male successors. This can be achieved through providing equal access to schemes, payments, land ownership and decision making.

Women's community development organisations have 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. Multi annual funding for independent community development in rural communities is vital for the sustainability of these services and supports.

³⁸ EU Commission (2021) [Summary of the assessment of the Irish recovery and resilience plan](#)

A Just Taxation and Expenditure System for all

We need to move towards a tax system that is gender-sensitive, fair and progressive, and both environmentally and socially sustainable. This is the only way that our tax system and our state spending can ensure that the necessary supports are in place for everyone to weather current crises and future shocks – in particular for women, and the most marginalised groups in society.

The historical agreement by the EU to borrow collectively to fund the pandemic recovery is a clear recognition of the need to invest to recover from the social and economic effects of the pandemic. However, Ireland and other European countries' ability to expand public spending has been curtailed in recent years due to the EU's strict fiscal rules – and the recent reform of the rules for 2024, while creating some degree of greater flexibility, maintains many of the unhelpfully arbitrary and constraining elements.

Tax plays a key role in shaping Irish society through funding our public services and social infrastructure, supporting economic activity and progressively redistributing resources. Ireland needs to increase its tax take in a fair, progressive, sustainable and gender-sensitive way. Broadening the tax base has been repeatedly included in Ireland's CSRs, however, the European Commission's assessment of Ireland's RRF notes that it does not contain specific measures to broaden the tax base.³⁹ In the most recent budget, a focus on permanent income tax cuts alongside once-off social protection expenditure creates a worrying trend of eroding the tax base while exacerbating income insecurity for many on the lowest incomes.

- **Standard rate pension tax relief**
- **End harmful direct and indirect fossil fuel subsidies**
- **Introduce a wealth tax**
- **Examine how employers' PRSI can be increased to fund social infrastructure**

Ireland has much lower rates of PRSI paid by employers, which is currently around half of the EU average.⁴⁰ An 1% increase in PRSI would increase revenue by €850m a year.⁴¹

- **Introduce a Financial Transaction Tax (FTT)**
- **Introduce a refundable tax credits system**

Introduce a refundable income tax credits system to ensure that all those in the tax system fully benefit from tax, particularly benefiting those on low-paid and part-time employment.

- **Minimum effective rate of Corporation Tax at 6%**

Ensure the adoption and implementation of a minimum effective corporation tax rate at 6%.

- **Procurement process reform**

Support advancement of a living wage, a reduced Gender Pay Gap and better conditions for workers by attaching social criteria, clauses and conditionality to government procurement processes and Employer incentive schemes.

ENDs.

³⁹ EU Commission (2021) [Summary of the assessment of the Irish recovery and resilience plan](#)

⁴⁰ NERI (2021) [Submission to the Commission on Pensions](#)

⁴¹ Department of Finance (2019) [Letter to Brendan Howlin TD re budget costings \[2019-3\(A\)\]](#)