

August 2023

The Women's Budget

National Women's Council's Pre-Budget Submission 2024



Top Three Asks for Women in Budget 2024

- **Public Childcare:** Commitment to the delivery of a fully public universal childcare model, and a significant increase in investment in the interim to reduce costs to families by a further 25% in Budget 2024
- **Zero Tolerance to Violence Against Women:** Fully cost and resource the implementation of the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, and ensure the new DSGBV Agency is adequately resourced to provide sufficient funding for frontline services
- **Benchmarking Social Protection Rates:** Benchmark social protection rates and pensions at a standard that provides a Minimum Essential Standard of Living for all, starting with an increase of at least €25 in all base rates in Budget 2024

The Women's Budget: NWC's Pre-Budget Submission 2024

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.

Budget 2024 presents the Government with an extraordinary opportunity to invest in a future for Ireland which is sustainable, just, caring and fair – a future where the state leads in tackling gender inequalities head-on, and one in which no woman is left behind.

Budget 2024 must prioritise the provision of Universal Public Services, the elimination of violence against women, and the eradication of poverty – including through the development of a social protection system which ensures no one is without the resources to live a decent life.

Universal Public Services are key to Gender Equality

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 significant surplus expected in Budget 2024 presents an extraordinary opportunity to invest in and develop our public service infrastructure.

Public Childcare, Tackling Violence Against Women and Income Inadequacy

Lack of affordable childcare is the biggest barrier to women's equal participation in society, and international evidence shows very clearly that a public, not-for-profit, childcare model is the best way to ensure access to affordable, quality childcare for families and decent pay and working conditions for childcare workers. This Budget must commit to the delivery of a universal, public model of childcare while cutting fees for families in 2024.

Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence go to the heart of women's equality. The Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence must be properly financed and resourced to advance a zero tolerance approach to violence against women. The new Statutory Agency on DSGBV must be properly resourced to provide sufficient funding to frontline services.

In the midst of an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, Government must tackle income inadequacy with a significant increase in social protection and pension rates in Budget 2024, and benchmark these rates at a level that ensures income adequacy and security for all.

Budget 2024 must be The Women's Budget

This budget is a windfall budget, and Government must ensure that this windfall is used to invest in public services, to tackle poverty and violence, towards a fair and sustainable future for all women.

We cannot outrun the cost-of-living crisis with tax cuts. Last year's tax cuts skewed towards higher earners, and these tax cuts further entrench gender inequalities by disadvantaging women. This Budget should avoid higher-earner income tax cuts and instead aim to support the most marginalised in society.

Throughout this Budget, Government must act decisively to stamp out racism, including systemic racism which the Direct Provision system perpetuates, and make Ireland a welcoming home for all of us. We must stand in solidarity with women fleeing situations of war and poverty, and against misogyny and racism. This Budget must ensure that funding and support is there to ensure sure that women of all backgrounds and ethnicities feel safe and welcome in this country, on the streets and in their homes.

While the unexpected nature of crises in recent years has resulted in the proliferation of once-off measures, this is not the approach to take when it comes to addressing systemic inequalities. We must develop an economy and a society resilient to future shocks and we cannot do this by leaving essential infrastructure and services to the market. The current windfall levels of revenue collected by the state are not predictably assured for the future, and that makes this moment even more pivotal.

Now is exactly the time to invest in the future – and in an equal, sustainable, feminist Ireland.

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Section 1

Delivering Universal Public Services

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Care

The Covid-19 pandemic reinforced for all of us the essential and vital nature of care in our society. However, care in Ireland continues to be consistently under-valued and under-resourced. Women continue to bear primary responsibility for unpaid care while workers, predominantly women, across the care sectors, are among the lowest paid in the economy, a key contributor to the gender pay gap.

Policy change on care

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.

Investment in a Public Model of Care is crucial. In countries with public care, services are more affordable, accessible and of higher quality.

The importance of care

Care is feminist: 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 and school age childcare system and universal adult social care.

Care is green: resulting in significantly less emissions than many other jobs and services, care jobs are also green jobs. Investment in care also helps us meet our climate goals, and care must be a key part of the transition to a new green economic model.

Care is economically beneficial: investment in care has been shown to act as a better economic stimulus than investment in traditional economic recovery approaches, such as construction; it also contributes to broadening the workforce and allowing for different kinds of working arrangement.

Early Years Education/School Age Childcare

- **Commit to the delivery of a fully publicly funded and provided model of Early Years Education and School Age Childcare, moving from market-led to a recognised public service**
- **Increase investment in Early Years Education and School Age Childcare to 1% of national income (GNI*) by no later than 2030¹ – €1.6bn² by 2030**
 - In Budget 2024, invest in affordability measures to reduce childcare costs by a further 25%, with the emphasis on reducing costs for low-income families – overall €346m³
- **Extend maximum 45-hours subsidy in the National Childcare Scheme to parents not in work**
- **Invest an additional minimum €50m to progress efforts to deliver a pay scale and better conditions to the sector’s workforce, supporting the ongoing professionalism of the sector through the Employment Regulation Order**
- **Increase funding for the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)**
- **Support child development through targeted funding to reduce adult child ratios within preschool rooms**
- **Provide ring fenced funding for a dedicated administrative staff member in services to support administration and regulatory requirements, in proportion to capacity of the service**

While the investment in last year’s Budget in the childcare sector was a very welcome start to reducing fees for parents, childcare costs are still unaffordable for many.⁴ While the pay deal for educators through Employment Regulation Orders⁵ saw 70% of the sector receive a pay rise last year, recruitment and retention is still a big issue for the sector, and educators are still the lowest paid within the education sector. In addition, affordability impacts most acutely on lone parents, with 60% unable to afford childcare services⁶.

A **fully Public Model of Early Years Education and School Age Childcare** is an absolute necessity if we want to build a care sector that works for children, parents, and educators – and would play a crucial role in addressing women’s economic and social inequality. Across Europe, the biggest factor in lowering the pay and conditions of care workers is the extent to which care is marketised. In countries with public early years education and care, services are more affordable, accessible and of higher quality.⁷

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)⁸ offers a range of supports designed to ensure that children with special needs can access Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Its goal is to deliver an inclusive pre-school experience, ensuring that every eligible child can meaningfully participate in ECCE and benefit from a high-quality pre-school education. AIM should be expanded to include all hours and weeks a child from 12 months of age attends its chosen service rather than just limiting it to 3 preschool hours.

¹ In line with UNICEF target per recommendation 8 of [Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality Report](#) (2021)

² Budget 2023 allocated €1.13bn to [Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth’s vote for Programme B: Sectoral Programmes for Children and Young People](#); GNI* for 2022 was €273bn per the CSO

³ Increase in [vote for Programme B in Budget 2023](#), which sought to decrease costs by 25% on average

⁴ Data on a range of European countries in 2021 showed Ireland to have among the highest childcare costs; OECD (2021) [Net Childcare Costs in EU Countries, 2021](#)

⁵ [Employment Regulation Order \(Early Years’ Service Joint Labour Committee\) No. 1 2022 – S.I. No 457 of 2022](#); [Employment Regulation Order \(Early Years’ Service Joint Labour Committee\) No. 2 2022 – S.I. No 458 of 2022](#)

⁶ SIPTU (2023) [Early Years Staffing Survey](#)

⁷ Heery, E. (2020) [Public Provision of Early Childhood Education, an overview of the international evidence](#)

⁸ [Access and Inclusion Model](#)

Universal Social Care

- **Increase investment in universal social care services by 0.4% of national income on a phased basis – €920m over three years, with at least €230m in first year⁹**
- **Invest in a pay structure and benefits (including sick pay and pensions) for all care workers, as recommended by the Citizens' Assembly¹⁰**
- **Provide a Statutory Home Support Scheme with equality of access and availability across the country through appropriate ring-fenced funding**
- **Establish a Commission on Care as outlined in the Programme for Government¹¹**
- **Resource the implementation of the Irish Sign Language Act 2017¹²**

Home support has been progressively privatised in Ireland to a largely unregulated industry. Domestic and personal care workers are often migrant women workers, and women from an ethnic minority background¹³, subject to precarious work and exploitation. As well as lower pay, workers in the private sector have less rights and are required to accept more unstable and ad hoc working hours than those working for non-profit or public sector providers.¹⁴ Only a quarter of care assistants are members of a trade union.¹⁵

NWC's feminist analysis of care includes not only the perspectives of the women who provide care but also the women who need such supports. The absence of a sufficient state response to supporting older people and disabled people to live independent lives, forces them into a position of dependence and leaves family carers to provide often very high levels of care. Significant and growing waiting lists for home support in many areas of the country, leaves many individuals and their families without access to vital supports.¹⁶

Investment in universal social care services is vital to ensure older people and disabled people have the necessary supports to reduce dependence on family and friends and to maintain a private life with independence and dignity. The European Commission notes that Ireland is over-reliant on institutional care, while home support, which is a key part of 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.¹⁷ An increase in investment in social care, equivalent to 0.4% of national income is needed to fund better pay for workers and increase access to quality services and supports.¹⁸

⁹ Sweeney, R., Singleton, S. and Murphy, E. (2022) [NWC submission to the Commission on Taxation and Welfare](#)

¹⁰ Recommendation 4 of the [Report on the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality](#) (2021)

¹¹ [Programme for Government: Our Shared Future](#) (2020), p. 51

¹² National Disability Authority (2021) [Report on the Operation of the Irish Sign Language Act 2017](#)

¹³ NWC (2022) [Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality on the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly](#)

¹⁴ Mulkeen, M. (2016) Going to market! An exploration of markets in social care, *Administration* 64(2): 33–59

¹⁵ Sweeney, R., Singleton, S. and Murphy, E. (2022) [NWC submission to the Commission on Taxation and Welfare](#)

¹⁶ Family Carers (2022) [The State of Caring](#)

¹⁷ European Commission (2021) [Analysis of the recovery and resilience plan of Ireland](#)

¹⁸ Sweeney, R., Singleton, S. and Murphy, E. (2022) [NWC submission to the Commission on Taxation and Welfare](#)

Health

Delivering Universal Healthcare

- Accelerate progress towards a universal model of healthcare provision
- Increase investment in the Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme to ensure that the remaining Social Inclusion and Community Action Programme (SICAP) areas are brought into the Programme
- Fund the Enhanced Community Care programme to support primary care services with accessibility and inclusion, including interpretation and translation services, universal design, plain English information, telemedicine and digital services in line with the needs identified in the Women’s Health Taskforce research with marginalised groups
- Continue to resource the transition away from private provision in public hospitals, in line with recommendations in the de Butléir report¹⁹
- Extend provision of free, safe and suitable period products to all public buildings
- Expand the Specialist Menopause Clinic network
- Expansion of Traveller Primary Health Care Projects in areas where they don't currently exist

The provision of universal healthcare is a feminist issue due to the structural inequalities that women face, particularly disabled women and women of minority ethnicity in accessing healthcare that appropriately meets their needs. Marginalised women are more likely to face lifetime health problems and die younger because of systemic health inequalities. They are particularly reliant on the public healthcare system and face significant barriers to timely care in a privatised system.²⁰

Accelerating progress on Sláintecare is vital: well-designed universal healthcare programmes have been proven to have positive impacts on women’s access to health services that meet their needs.²¹

¹⁹ De Butléir, D. (2019) [Report of the Independent Review Group established to examine Private Activity in Public Hospitals](#)

²⁰ NWC (2019) [Evidence Base for the Development of the Women’s Health Action Plan](#)

²¹ Quick, J., Jay, J., Langer, A. (2014) [Improving Women’s Health through Universal Health Coverage](#), *PLOS Medicine* 11(1)

Improving Reproductive Health Services

- **Continue the roll-out of the universal free contraception scheme, targeting women aged 30-35 in the next stage – €10m**
- **Resource and implement the recommendations of the O’Shea Abortion Services Review – €2m**
- **Allocate ringfenced funding to develop the Assisted Human Reproduction Regulatory Authority and to expand access to public tertiary infertility services, including IVF – €10m**

Contraception

Free contraception for women aged 17-30 is a welcome development and must be built on to ensure access for all ages. In the NHS (UK), free contraception is available to all, including adolescents.²² Universal access to free and accessible contraception is a public health intervention which is fundamental to reproductive health and rights and critical for achieving gender equality.²³ With the significant rise in living costs, there is an urgent need to ensure that women and girls are not priced out of the most effective forms of contraception such as coils which require an upfront investment of approximately €300.²⁴ Data from Public Health England shows a significant Return on Investment on publicly funded contraception: £9 for every £1 invested over 10 years.²⁵

Abortion Care

Marie O’Shea’s independent Review of abortion services recommended 60 operational changes. Investment is required to now implement these recommendations, particularly to improve infrastructure in maternity hospitals, recruit additional new staff posts, train all providers and further promote MyOptions helpline.²⁶

IVF

The allocation of €10m to commence publicly funded IVF in September 2023 was a landmark moment for women and couples. The Women’s Health Action Plan has begun the process of introducing a stepped care model for fertility support, with six fertility hubs nationwide.²⁷ Investment in Budget 2024 must continue this progress: funding will enable a meaningful expansion in access and expedite delivery of a fully public model.

²² NHS (2021) [Where can I get contraception?](#)

²³ Rice, L. et al (2020) [Universal access to contraception: women, families, and communities benefit](#), Am J Obstet Gynecol 222(2): 150.e1-150.e5

²⁴ [Irish Family Planning Association Service Costs](#) (2023)

²⁵ Public Health England (2018) [Extending Public Health England’s contraception return on investment tool Maternity and primary care settings](#)

²⁶ Marie O’Shea (2023) [The Independent Review of the Operation of the Health \(Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy\) Act 2018](#)

²⁷ Department of Health (2023) [Minister for Health announces full funding for assisted human reproduction treatment from September](#)

Investing in Mental Health

- **Resource the reinstatement of a National Lead/Director of Mental Health within the HSE**
- **Allocate 10% of the overall health budget to mental health, with a focus on developing specialist child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS)**
- **Invest in mental health in the community and primary care and tackle the long waiting lists for Primary Care Psychology through allocated funding**
- **Resource an increase in specialist inpatient bed capacity for eating disorders from the existing 3 beds to the 23 beds pledged in the Model of Care, as well as further develop community-based teams²⁸ – €2m**
- **Establish a Mother and Baby Unit at St. Vincent’s University Hospital and provide funding to build the Unit – €12m capital costs and €1.5m staffing**
- **Resource gender-sensitive implementation of Sharing the Vision, starting with training and support for all frontline staff on gender-sensitive, trauma-aware and inclusive practice**

Sláintecare’s target for mental health funding is 10% of the overall health budget, yet in Budget 2023 Ireland allocated just 5.1%.²⁹ It is imperative that the reinstatement of a national lead for mental health within the HSE is achieved to ensure strategic and budgetary oversight and leadership in the design and development of mental health services nationally, and deliver on reforms as envisaged in Sharing the Vision.

Low funding disproportionately impacts women who report poorer mental health³⁰ and experience higher rates of anxiety and depression.³¹ Eating disorders also disproportionately affect women, particularly young women. The National Clinical Programme for Eating Disorders (NCPED) aims to establish a network of 16 community mental health teams but only four are in operation. A further five teams are in development.³²

Investment in perinatal mental health services is also required. One in five women will experience mental health difficulties during pregnancy and post-birth and accessing support can be challenging. Despite commitments to develop Ireland’s first Mother and Baby Unit, there has been no allocation of funding to progress this. In the absence of a MBU, mothers with severe mental health difficulties are supported in general mental health inpatient units without their babies, contrary to best-practice, and this separation can have a profound adverse impact on parent-infant attachment.

Budget 2024 must resource gender-sensitive implementation of Sharing the Vision.³³ Extensive research shows that gender affects access to and experience of healthcare, and practitioners require greater training to effectively respond to the particular mental health needs of women and girls. Resourcing community-based initiatives with enhanced service hours, specialist drop-in clinics and provision of out of hours access can support women’s engagement and retention in services.

²⁸ [HSE response to PQ from Mark Ward TD 26/04/2023](#); [HSE response to PQ from Mark Ward TD 26/04/2023](#); [HSE Model of Care for Ireland: Eating Disorder Services](#) (2018)

²⁹ Department of Health (2022) [Minister Butler at the Department of Health Budget 2023 Press Briefing](#)

³⁰ Department of Health (2021) [Healthy Ireland Survey 2021](#)

³¹ Maynooth University and Trinity College Dublin (2020) [COVID-19 Psychological Survey](#)

³² [PQ response to Sorca Clarke TD 04/07/2023](#)

³³ Department of Health (2023) [Embedding Women’s Mental Health in Sharing the Vision](#)

Housing

- **Significantly increase investment in State-led housing for the provision of public, affordable and cost-rental homes**
 - Aim to increase Approved Housing Bodies and Local Authorities ownership of total housing stock to 20%
- **Introduce a Rent Freeze and a new system of rent controls to deliver affordable rents, along with further spending on tenant protections and private rent inspections**
- **Ban evictions for at least two years to reduce numbers entering homelessness and develop a Secure Tenancy Model in the private rental sector to create genuine long-term tenancies**
- **Fully resource work to implement the White Paper on ending Direct Provision**
- **Retain all public/state-owned land in public control for the provision of housing**
- **Provide resources to gender-proof all homeless and housing strategies and budgets, and establish gender-sensitive support services for women living in homelessness**
- **Establish a task force to examine the impact of housing insecurity on lone parent families**
- **Fully resource the National Disability Implementation Plan and provide sufficient funding for all areas of disability housing policy to support disabled people and older people**

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.³⁴ Traveller and Roma families forced to live on roadsides are also excluded from official statistics.³⁵

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.³⁶ Of families made homeless since the ending of the eviction ban in March, lone parent families make up 70%.³⁷ Lone parents are particularly at risk from housing insecurity as are non-white, especially black, and Traveller and Roma women and men.³⁸

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.³⁹ Ireland's housing strategy remains over-reliant on the private sector – both to build homes and to provide housing through the private rented sector. We need a housing policy that delivers secure, affordable accommodation for all and which leaves no one behind.

³⁴ Bretheron, J. and Mayock, P. (2021) [Women's Homelessness \(European Evidence Review\)](#)

³⁵ Cork and Kerry RTAWG (2022) [Traveller Homelessness \(A Hidden Crisis\)](#)

³⁶ ESRI (2021) [Monitoring Adequate Housing in Ireland](#)

³⁷ RTÉ (2023) [Record number of families in emergency accommodation, figures show](#)

³⁸ IHREC (2018) [Discrimination and Inequality in Housing in Ireland](#)

³⁹ The Housing Agency (2021) [Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2020 Key findings](#)

Feminist Climate Justice

The transition to a carbon-neutral, sustainable economy – “from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy”⁴⁰ – presents an extraordinary opportunity to reduce social inequalities and to transform our society into one that is fair, equitable, strong and caring.

Impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on women

Women are more likely to be hardest hit by the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, in Ireland and across the world.⁴¹ 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.

Care work is green work

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. This Budget provides an opportunity to invest in the **sustainable provision of public services** in a way that repairs and regenerates our environment, provides decent work, and actively tackles poverty and inequality. Movements like the push for a four-day work week are both feminist and green – increasing wellbeing while reducing our impact on the planet.

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

- **Gender, equality and poverty-proof all climate policies and investment**
- **Centre economic success on socio-economic and environmental equality and wellbeing**
- **End direct and indirect state fossil fuel subsidies – +€2.2bn**

We must ensure that climate and environment policies do not exacerbate existing social inequalities, and that they identify and seize opportunities to narrow those inequalities. The disproportionate and differentiated impact of these issues on women must be considered at every level of state action – from national plans to sectoral and local ones.

Key to this is changing the markers that we use to measure economic success, away from a focus on GDP and growth and towards measures that focus on socio-economic and environmental equality and wellbeing, valuing of care work, access to public services and social inclusion.

Fossil fuels account for 57% of Ireland’s total greenhouse gas emissions while direct and indirect state fossil fuel subsidies in Ireland amounted to €2.2bn in 2020, according to data from the CSO.⁴² These subsidies and tax mechanisms need to be ended, and we need to ensure that all public bodies divest fully from fossil fuels.

⁴⁰ Climate Justice Alliance (2023) [Just Transition: A Framework for Change](#)

⁴¹ European Parliament (2015) [The Gender Dimension of Climate Justice](#)

⁴² Social Justice Ireland (2022) [Time to Review Fossil Fuel Subsidies](#)

Invest in a Just Transition for Women

- **Prioritise establishment and resourcing of the overdue statutory 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 production⁴³**
- **Increase the agency of women in agriculture to fully participate through increased funding and equal access to resources and schemes such as Targeted Agriculture Modernisation Schemes (TAMS) and LEADER**

The overdue establishment of the statutory Just Transition Commission must be prioritised, and it must be effectively financed to work with local communities and provide clear, implementable advice to Government for the transition to a new economy and society. The voices of women must be central to this work not just in terms of building green employment, but in strengthening public services, valuing the role of care work, and fostering social and community inclusion.

Recognising the specific issues experienced by women in the transition to a regenerative, distributive economy and society is essential. Farmers, the custodians of our land with rich knowledge and understanding of it, must be supported and encouraged to conserve and restore biodiversity. The human risks posed by climate breakdown and biodiversity loss are vast, affecting our food systems, health, energy and more. In 2019, Ireland became the first country to declare a joint climate and biodiversity emergency, and the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss emphasised that the dual climate and biodiversity crises cannot be addressed separately.⁴⁴

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**
- **Reduce the cost of public transport for people who struggle to access it, including:**
 - Keep the School Transport Scheme free as during the 2022/2023 academic year
 - Expanding the Free Travel Scheme to people in the international protection process, and those fleeing domestic abuse⁴⁵
 - Extend the Young Adult Travel Card to 24-year-olds and make fare reductions for young people permanent – €5m⁴⁶

Transport is not a gender-neutral issue. Understanding the different ways in which women use transport is essential to building inclusive transport infrastructure, where everyone feels comfortable and safe going to and from work, schools, college, creches, shops and leisure. In Ireland, nearly one quarter of journeys are “companion journeys” which include driving children to school, a responsibility primarily of women, so making it safer, easier and cheaper for children to get to school without needing a car would have a significant impact on household costs, oil imports and pollution.⁴⁷ It would also reduce the high

⁴³ Environmental Pillar, Stop Climate Chaos (SCC) and Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) (2021) [Towards a New Agricultural and Food Policy for Ireland](#)

⁴⁴ Citizen's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss (2023) [Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss](#)

⁴⁵ As in [Northern Ireland](#)

⁴⁶ National Youth Council of Ireland (2023) [NYCI Pre-Budget Submission 2024](#)

⁴⁷ CSO (2020) [National Travel Survey 2019](#)

levels of women’s car dependency linked to care work.⁴⁸ We need an inclusive approach to transport infrastructure, ensuring that all needs are catered for – those of women, disabled people, people in rural Ireland and all members of marginalised communities. The Young Adult Travel Card was introduced in Budget 2022 enabling anyone aged 19 to 23 years to avail of an average fare discount of 50% across all public transport services, along with some private providers. The extension of the scheme to 24 years will encourage public transport usage while reducing costs on young people and at home.

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**
 - Expand the Fully Funded Energy Upgrade Scheme to ensure all low-income households in low BER homes are eligible, regardless of homeownership status; this should include tenants receiving HAP, on the condition of a long-term lease being offered
 - Adequately resource Local Authorities to invest in Community Energy Advisors service, to regularly review housing stock, and to fund retrofitting schemes with a view to ensuring all social housing reaches a minimum B2 Building Energy Rating (BER) by 2030
 - Adopt targeted measures to ensure Travellers and Roma living in all types of accommodation can avail of energy upgrades and SEAI grants
- **Increase the Fuel Allowance in line with cost-of-living increases and expand eligibility by:**
 - Increasing the payable period to 32 weeks
 - Extending eligibility to people in receipt of the Working Family Payment, and remove the wait period for people in receipt of Jobseeker’s Allowance
 - Ensure the living arrangements of Traveller and Roma families are properly covered by Fuel Allowance eligibility including Traveller and Roma families officially sharing
- **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 enormous increase in energy costs over the last two years has hit many of the most disadvantaged people in Ireland the hardest. Women are at greater risk of energy poverty due to their lower average incomes,⁴⁹ and lone parents, older women living alone, disabled people and carers are particularly at risk. European research has demonstrated that older women have a higher winter mortality rate due to their increased vulnerability to energy poverty.⁵⁰ The one-off and continuing measures introduced this year and outlined in the Energy Poverty Action Plan are welcome and did help ease some pressure on households over the winter, but further action needs to be more targeted to assist those in most need – expanding and increasing Fuel Allowance is a much more progressive support than universal credit.⁵¹ Understanding the real impact of energy poverty on women is hampered by the lack of data disaggregated by gender related to energy poverty – with all data created at a household level it masks any gendered patterns internally in households. Engaging in research to properly understand the profile of the gendered impact of energy poverty in Ireland, as well as the impact on marginalised communities, is vitally important.

⁴⁸ Transport Infrastructure Ireland (2020) [Travelling in a Woman’s Shoes](#)

⁴⁹ Papadimitriou, E., Casabianca, E. and Cabeza Martinez, B. (2023) [Energy poverty and gender in the EU: the missing debate](#), Policy Brief: European Commission

⁵⁰ EmpowerMed (2021) [Gender and Energy Poverty](#)

⁵¹ Parliamentary Budget Office (2022) [Pre-Budget 2023 Commentary](#)

Section 2

Zero Tolerance to Violence against Women

Invest in zero tolerance to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence

- **Fully cost and resource the implementation of the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence**
- **Establish and resource an independent external monitoring structure to monitor the implementation of the Strategy**
- **Establish & resource the new Statutory Agency on DSGBV to carry out its functions and provide appropriate multi-annual funding to frontline services working to support survivors of DSGBV**
- **Provide multi-annual funding for advocacy research to achieve a zero tolerance approach, including for the Observatory on Violence Against Women and Girls as the only NGO collective structure that addresses all forms of VAWG**
- **Establish a DSGBV Data Strategy coordinated by the Agency for the implementation of a 'gold standard' of data collection and analysis by all relevant public service bodies, including specialist services, especially those working with migrant women, disabled women, Traveller and Roma women, rural women and LGBTQIA+ populations in the design of disaggregated collection methods**

2023 has been characterised by an epidemic of violence against women. From the beginning of 2022 to date, 18 women died violently.⁵² Previous years have also shown extremely concerning trends. PULSE data related to Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence incidents reported that in 2019-2021 sexual offences with domestic violence motivations increased by 399% from 2020 to 2021 and the number of sexual assault incidents have increased over time.⁵³ Whilst the increased incidents of domestic abuse can be partly attributed to Covid-19 and related restrictions, the rate of recorded abuse has continued to rise post-lockdown. In the first quarter of 2022, domestic abuse calls and incidents were 13% higher than the same time in 2021.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ UCD's Sexual Exploitation Research Programme published research showing an urgent need to protect girls in care from sexual exploitation and predators.⁵⁶

In June 2022, NWC welcomed the Minister for Justice's publication of Zero Tolerance the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and crucially its commitment to establish an integrated whole-of-government national response through the creation of a new statutory agency. NWC calls for a strong budgetary commitment to fully implement this ambitious Strategy.

Moreover, the Strategy includes actions to enhance coordination of data collection strategies. Systematic and adequate collection of disaggregated data is crucial, not only to document the prevalence of DSGBV in Ireland, but also to inform the legal and policy frameworks regulating the prevention, response and prosecution components.

Specialist services have reported concerns regarding the uncertain and short-term nature of funds allocated to combat DSGBV.⁵⁷ Specialised support organisations and civil society must be adequately resourced to meet the increasing demand of services combating DSGBV. Given that organisations provide

⁵² [Women's Aid Femicide Watch](#) 23/07/2023

⁵³ An Garda Síochána (2022) [Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: A Report on Crime Levels and Garda Operational Responses](#)

⁵⁴ An Garda Síochána (2022) [Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: A Report on Crime Levels and Garda Operational Responses](#)

⁵⁵ CSO (2023) [Sexual Violence Survey 2022](#)

⁵⁶ Canning, M., Keenan, M. and Breslin, R. (2023) [Protecting Against Predators: A Scoping Study on the Sexual Exploitation of Children and Young People in Ireland](#), p.41

⁵⁷ Irish Observatory on Violence Against Women (2022) [Shadow Report to Greivio in respect of Ireland](#)

services to highly vulnerable, hard to reach, minority and minoritised women, funding shortages have a particularly consequential impact on communities that experience intersectional forms of violence. Moreover, despite the National Observatory's important work, which allows organisations to come together to work towards improved policies and service provision, it does not benefit from formal recognition, and is not resourced through multi-annual funding. Frontline services and the Observatory must be adequately funded with long-term, sustainable, multi-annual funding to ensure that they are able to carry out their activities, allow for longer term planning, and function effectively.

It is imperative that Budget 2024 acknowledges domestic, sexual and gender-based violence as a large-scale social problem and commitments to a strategic response are evidenced in dedicated budget-lines.

Invest in increasing collaboration between the legal processes regarding domestic and sexual violence

- **Resource a comprehensive system of both court and non-court support for adult victim-survivors of domestic and sexual violence**
- **Resource an expansion of training/support for professionals whom victim-survivors encounter to acquire an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of domestic and sexual violence and its impact upon both adults and children, including the judiciary, members of the legal profession and members of An Garda Síochána**
- **Provide free legal advice, acknowledging the gendered nature and constraints that are experienced by victim-survivors of all gender-based violent crimes in accessing legal advice**
- **Resource physical court environments for the provision of sufficient waiting and consultation rooms, and separate facilities for victim-survivors of domestic or sexual violence**
- **Resource an increase in the number of judges, in line with the OECD and the Judicial Planning Working Group report⁵⁸, to address one of the main causes of the court systems delays and its attritional effect on victim-survivors**

In line with Action 3.2.1 of the Implementation Plan of the Third National Strategy⁵⁹, NWC and the Department of Justice commissioned research focusing on the Intersection of the Criminal Justice, Private Family Law and Public Law Child Care Processes in Relation to Domestic and Sexual Violence.⁶⁰ This report highlights the urgent need for reforms across the justice system for survivors reporting domestic and sexual abuse. The current system means that many survivors are forced to navigate three separate legal systems and the onus is on the survivor to navigate these processes simultaneously, causing significant trauma and revictimisation for survivors. The report stems from the Department of Justice initiative Supporting a Victim's Journey⁶¹ showing the supports needed for victim-survivors through the justice process, followed from the recommendations of the O'Malley Review.⁶² It is key that measures in the 'Supporting a Victim's Journey Plan' are extended to all victim-survivors of all forms of DSGBV. It is

⁵⁸ OECD (2023) [Modernising Staffing and Court Management Practices in Ireland: Towards a More Responsive and Resilient Justice System](#)

⁵⁹ Department of Justice (2022) [Implementation Plan for Third National DSGBV Strategy](#), Action 3.2.1

⁶⁰ 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](#)

⁶¹ Department of Justice (2021) [Supporting a Victim's Journey: A Plan to help victims and vulnerable witnesses in sexual violence cases](#)

⁶² O'Malley, T. et al. (2020) [Review of Protections for Vulnerable Witnesses in the Investigation and Prosecution of Sexual Offences](#)

vital that the legal process does not further traumatise people who have experienced domestic and sexual violence and fulfils the victim-survivor centred approach, as outlined in the Third National Strategy. NWC calls for a budgetary commitment to implement the key recommendations set out in this report to address the unique needs of victim-survivors of domestic and sexual violence within the court system.

Ensure comprehensive supports and a long-term housing approach to all forms of Violence Against Women (incl. pathways for exiting the sex trade)

- **All refuges must be resourced and able to respond appropriately to the intersecting needs of all women and children, including Traveller and Roma women, disabled women, migrant women, women in addiction and women exiting prostitution and sex trafficking**
- **A minimum of 1 refuge space per 10,000 population with a particular focus in 2024 on delivering spaces in those counties with no refuges and those that are planned to be delivered as per the Third National Strategy Implementation Plan⁶³**
- **Resource an integrated gender sensitive response looking at emergency accommodation in combination with social housing and the private rental sector to ensure that victim-survivors are supported in securing long-term housing through a clear pathway out of refuges, including trafficked and prostituted women**

Domestic abuse is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children. According to Safe Ireland, 180 women and 275 children seek emergency accommodation every month and in 2021 more than 3,000 requests for refuge could not be met by services.⁶⁴ There is an urgent need to establish domestic violence refuge accommodation units in every county and meet the requirements under the Istanbul Convention. Action 2.2 and 2.3 of the Implementation Plan must be fulfilled and resourced to enable victim-survivors of DSGBV to rapidly access and live in safe, accessible short and long-term accommodation. Government must ensure the availability of accessible, quality, specialist and community-based DSGBV services so that all people who experience DSGBV have access to integrated services in the short, medium and longer term.

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, as outlined in Action 2.6 of the Implementation Plan⁶⁵. NWC calls for the full resourcing and implementation of these actions in the Third National Strategy.

⁶³ Department of Justice (2022) [Implementation Plan for Third National DSGBV Strategy](#), Action 2.3.2

⁶⁴ Safe Ireland (2021) [Women's Domestic Abuse Refuges: Submission to Oireachtas Justice Committee](#)

⁶⁵ Department of Justice (2022) [Implementation Plan for Third National DSGBV Strategy](#), Action 2.6.

Section 3

An Adequate Standard of Living For All Women

Ensuring An Adequate Standard of Living for All Women

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.⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷ 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 winter⁶⁸, 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.⁶⁹ 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 earners⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

We need a social protection system that can support all women to achieve a minimum essential standard of living⁷², 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 Budget 2024 a gender equality impact statement with disaggregated data highlighting the impact on ethnicity, disability and other equality grounds.

- 1. End Poverty**
- 2. Address Child Maintenance for Lone Parents**
- 3. Individualise the Social Protection System**
- 4. Provide Decent Work for All**
- 5. Deliver Pension Justice for Women**

⁶⁶ National Economic and Social Council (2022). [Ireland's Social Welfare System. Gender, Family and Class](#)

⁶⁷ Doorley, K. at al (2018). [The Gender impact of Irish budgetary policy 2008-2018](#). Dublin: ESRI.

⁶⁸ NWC (2022) [Budget 2023 reaction press release](#)

⁶⁹ NWC (2022) [Post-Budget 2023 analysis](#)

⁷⁰ ESRI (2022) [Distributional impact of tax and welfare policies: Budget 2023](#)

⁷¹ Central Statistics Office (2020) [Women and Men in Ireland 2019](#)

⁷² Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2023) [Minimum Essential Standard of Living](#)

End poverty

- **Establish the Minimum Essential Standard of Living⁷³ as the benchmark for social protection payments by 2026**
 - in the interim, increase social protection rates at least €25 in Budget 2024 – €1,047.5m⁷⁴
- **Increase Qualified Child payments by €10 for children under 12 and €15 for children aged 12 and above in Budget 2024 – €175m⁷⁵**
- **Increase Child Benefit in line with inflation⁷⁶**
- **Increase the income thresholds for the Working Family Payment**
- **Adjust income disregards, means tests and eligibility thresholds to reflect changes in the National Minimum Wage to maintain the value of these supports**
- **Resource the development and implementation of a new National Strategy for Women and Girls**
- **Reform of the Habitual Residence Condition test to ensure that victim-survivors of DSGBV can access housing supports and social protections promptly**

Low-income households are disproportionately affected by inflation and rising costs-of-living because they spend more on necessities such as food and energy – and even before the pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis, many people did not have sufficient income or wealth to live a decent life.⁷⁷ This is exacerbated further when public service infrastructure is not sufficiently developed to meet the needs of communities across the country.

Lone parent households, 86% of whom are headed by women, are nearly three times more likely to be living in consistent poverty than the general population.⁷⁸ People unable to work due to long-standing health problems continue to be at a much greater risk of poverty than the general population⁷⁹, even before the additional cost of disability is taken into account. Women living in rural areas experience further challenges, with rural households having greater levels of income inadequacy than urban households.⁸⁰ Among those aged 65 and over, 15% of men and 25% of women are at risk of poverty. Women are also at greater risk of energy poverty due to their lower average incomes⁸¹ – with lone parents, older women living alone⁸², disabled people and carers particularly affected.

The provision of public service infrastructure, including affordable childcare and social care, housing and transport, are key measures to reduce the risk of poverty among women. In addition, adequate social protection payments are essential for women who are unable to work through age, disability, ill health or other reasons. According to the ESRI, only full-time employment is effective in lifting families out of poverty.⁸³ This is hugely problematic for lone parents who bear primary responsibility for care and often

⁷³ Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2023) [MESL 2023 Report](#)

⁷⁴ Social Justice Ireland (2023) [Budget Choices: Pre-Budget Submission, Budget 2024](#)

⁷⁵ St Vincent de Paul (2023) [Pre-Budget Submission 2024](#)

⁷⁶ A €50 increase in Child Benefit would cost c. €740m; SJI (2023) [Pre-Budget Submission, Budget 2024](#)

⁷⁷ Economics Observatory (2023) [How is the cost of living crisis affecting public health](#)

⁷⁸ CSO (2022) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions \(2022\)](#)

⁷⁹ CSO (2021) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions \(2021\)](#)

⁸⁰ Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2022) [MESL 2022 Report](#)

⁸¹ European Parliament (2017) [Gender perspective on access to energy in the EU](#)

⁸² CSO (2020) [Women and Men in Ireland 2019](#)

⁸³ Maître, B., Russel, H., Smyth, E. (2021) [The Dynamics of Child Poverty in Ireland: Evidence from GUI](#)

cannot reconcile full time work with care. The social protection system must recognise lone parents' care responsibilities and must ensure that part time work combined with social protection supports is adequate in providing economic security to one parent families.

Targeted recommendations and supports for women most at risk of poverty

Lone parents

- **Extend Jobseekers Transitional Payment to lone parents in education, training or employment until the youngest child reaches the end of second level education⁸⁴**
- **Extend the Living Alone Increase and Household Benefits Package to lone parents**

Disabled women

- **Prioritise investment in increasing and providing multiannual funding to support equal access to disability services that are essential to the right to independent living, including Personal Assistant Services, home supports, alternative forms of respite and personalised budgets**
- **Provide a recurring cost of disability payment of €40 per week to those in receipt of a disability-related payment – €462.6m⁸⁵**
- **Invest in and resource Disabled Persons' Organisations at national and local levels, including increasing funding and access of Disability Equality Training**
- **Provide funding to support disabled people under 65 to move out of nursing homes into appropriate housing – €17.5m⁸⁶**

Traveller and Roma women, and asylum seekers

- **Fully resource the forthcoming National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, and the forthcoming Migrant Integration Strategy**
- **Ensure Child Benefit is a truly universal payment:**
 - Grant Child Benefit to children whose parents are seeking asylum – €4.7m⁸⁷
 - Remove the Habitual Residence Condition requirement
- **Extend the Free Travel Scheme to people in the international protection process**

Carers

- **Increase the income disregards for Carer's Allowance to €1,000 (couple) and €500 (single)**

Young women

- **Increase the rate payable for young Jobseekers aged 18-24 years in Budget 2024, with the aim of full restoration by 2026 – €63m⁸⁸**
- **Bring sub-minimum rates of minimum wage for people aged under 20 in line with the full National Minimum Wage rate for those aged over 20**

⁸⁴ A lone parent working full time in minimum wage employment can lose €56 a week once their youngest child reaches the age of 14; Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2023) [Pre-Budget Submission 2024](#)

⁸⁵ St Vincent de Paul (2023) [Pre-Budget Submission 2024](#)

⁸⁶ Disability Federation of Ireland (2023) [Pre-Budget Submission 2024](#)

⁸⁷ St Vincent de Paul (2023) [Pre-Budget Submission 2024](#)

⁸⁸ As recommended by [Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection](#); SVP (2023) [Pre-Budget Submission 2024](#)

Address Child Maintenance for Lone Parents

- **Establish a statutory Child Maintenance Agency through the provision of appropriate resourcing and multi-annual funding**
- **The State should assume liability and ensure child maintenance is paid where a parent does not pay or does not have sufficient income to pay the required maintenance**
- **Introduce effective substitute maintenance mechanisms based on advance payment by the State**
- **Responsibility for recouping payments from liable parents should be with the State, where applicable**
- **Child Maintenance should be decoupled from social protection payments and be treated as a non-means tested, non-taxable income for children**

Child maintenance plays an important role in protecting against poverty, and the current system must be reformed – including by the setting up of a statutory Child Maintenance Agency. As there is currently no such state agency, pursuit of maintenance is left up to the claiming parent.⁸⁹ A Statutory Child Maintenance Agency would take the issue of child maintenance out of the adversarial court system, reduce the burden on women to litigate for child maintenance orders and act as an anti-poverty measure. Unlike other jurisdictions, child maintenance in Ireland is seen largely as a personal, parental obligation and therefore, a matter of private family law.⁹⁰

International experience indicates that where child maintenance is a reliable source of income, there was a 30% reduction in the poverty gap.⁹¹ A 2022 survey of lone parents in Ireland found that only 35% are receiving maintenance without arrears.⁹² A Statutory Child Maintenance Agency has been called for by the Joint Committee on Social Protection in its Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland⁹³ and by the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.⁹⁴ The Report of the Child Maintenance Review Group⁹⁵ in November 2022 highlighted the need for “immediate and radical reform” of the current system in relation to Child Maintenance, and a majority of the group supported the setting up of a statutory Child Maintenance Agency.

⁸⁹ Joint Committee on Justice (2023) [Report on Enforcement of Orders Relating to Child Maintenance, Access and Custody](#)

⁹⁰ NWC (2021) [Submission to the Child Maintenance Review Group](#)

⁹¹ Hakovirta, M., and Rantalaiho, M. (2011) [Family Policy and Shared Parenting in Nordic Countries](#), European Journal of Social Security, 13(2): 247–266

⁹² Spark Ireland Campaign (2022) [Child maintenance survey](#)

⁹³ Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection (2017) [Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland](#)

⁹⁴ [UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#)

⁹⁵ Child Maintenance Review Group (2022) [Report November 2022](#)

Individualise the Social Protection System

- **Adopt a fully individualised social protection system so that women are treated as individuals, rather than dependents of their partners**
- **Eliminate the Limitation Rule for Jobseeker's Allowance**
- **Change eligibility rules to enable qualified adult women to access a range of active labour market programmes**
- **Resource a national survey to ascertain skills, education, health, care and employment experience of qualified adult women to address data gaps**

The 'male breadwinner' nature of our social protection system is evidenced by the concept of the 'qualified adult' or adult dependent. Under this system, payments to two parent families comprise a payment for the main claimant and a Qualified Adult payment to additional adults in the household. Child dependent payments are also payable to the main claimant.⁹⁶ This system creates a relationship of dependency for Qualified Adults. They do not receive an income in their own right and are excluded from accessing many active labour market programmes that require a core social protection payment as a condition of eligibility.

Data from the Department of Social Protection shows that of the 124,521 people who received a top up for a Qualified Adult in April 2021, 83% are men. Women represent the vast majority of those who are dependent adults in our social protection system.⁹⁷ Though appearing to be 'gender neutral', the gendered effects of this system have clear implications for women's economic independence.

The Department of Social Protection's Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 commits to examining the feasibility of individualising payments, through the provision of a direct payment to the second 'dependent' adult in a household, with a view to reducing co-dependency and improving employment and earnings outcomes. The Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality also recommended that we adopt a fully individualised social protection system to reflect the diversity of today's lives and to promote an equal division of paid work and care.⁹⁸

The Covid-19 income supports have demonstrated that it is possible to administer payments in an individualised way.⁹⁹ We now have an opportunity to abolish the system of dependency and implement an individualised approach, based on equality where women and men are paid in their own right and have individual entitlement to all of the benefits and supports that accompany an unemployment payment.

⁹⁶ National Economic and Social Council (2021) [Ireland's Social Welfare System: Gender, Family and Class](#)

⁹⁷ National Women's Council (2022) [Submission to the Commission on Taxation and Welfare](#)

⁹⁸ Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality (2021) [Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality](#)

⁹⁹ ERSI (2021) [COVID-19 and the Irish Welfare System](#)

Provide Decent Work for All

- **Pilot a Participation Income (PI) which recognises other meaningful contributions such as care or voluntary work¹⁰⁰**
- **Recognise care responsibilities so those working part-time do not have to prove they can work full time to be eligible for Jobseeker's Payments**
- **Increase Maternity, Adoptive, Paternity and Parent's Benefit payments to at least €295 per week, and examine the implementation of a percentage-of-earnings model of leave/benefit**
- **Convert existing unpaid Parental Leave to paid leave**
- **Make Medical Care Leave paid, at the rate of Illness Benefit at a minimum**
- **Provide illness benefit payment for new mothers/birthing parents during their treatment for serious illness (including cancer), along with:**
 - a fund for employers for costs associated with sick pay cover where a new mother has had to postpone maternity leave; and
 - research grants for examining the needs of expectant parents diagnosed with serious illness (including cancer)¹⁰¹
- **Ensure National Minimum Wage increases do not affect eligibility for social protection supports**
- **Ensure participation in advocacy/policy forums does not affect eligibility for social protection supports**
- **Develop the Traveller and Roma Training, Employment and Enterprise Strategy in a timely fashion to combat the chronic unemployment levels impacting Traveller and Roma women**
- **Resource a time use survey to gather updated data on time spent on unpaid work**
- **Fund a pilot of the four-day week model in the public sector**
- **Legislate for collective bargaining rights**

As Ireland hits record employment rates, it is important that no woman is left behind in having access to decent work.

The current employment and social protection system does not properly accommodate care responsibilities, which would represent a decent and green alternative for both women and men as well

¹⁰⁰ A **Participation Income (PI)** is an alternative to our current welfare system, which is overly focused on transitions from welfare to work at the expense of other forms of participation. A Participation Income would recognise other meaningful contributions such as care or voluntary work, and other forms of work that contribute to the common good. Countries like The Netherlands have taken steps towards a system that takes care and other socially useful forms of contribution into account: the Dutch system acknowledges part time work as a legitimate choice and it also gives people who are caring for children under 12 the right to access unemployment benefit. The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) have recommended piloting a Participation Income system. (NESC (2020) [The Future of the Irish Social Welfare System: Participation and Protection](#); Murphy, M & McGann, M (2020) [Reconfiguring Welfare in an Eco-Social State: Participation Income and Universal Services](#); Family Carers Ireland and Maynooth University (2023) [Towards a Participation Income for Family Carers](#).)

¹⁰¹ Total cost €3m; Irish Cancer Society (2023) [Pre-Budget Submission 2024](#)

as helping to address unmet need for care services.¹⁰² Failure to recognise and value care impacts most negatively on lone parents.¹⁰³

The Department of Social Protection has a key role in creating the conditions in which women can access decent, secure work that is compatible with care responsibilities. DSP must ensure that people can combine care and work in a way that facilitates them to obtain decent work and that people have a secure, alternative source of income that gives them a realistic option of refusing work that does not pay. Investment must also include improving the pay and terms of conditions of the care workforce.

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 services.¹⁰⁴ Payments in most OECD countries offer at least 50% of average earnings, with many offering 100%,¹⁰⁵ 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.

While lone parents, migrants and ethnic minority women¹⁰⁶, Traveller and Roma women¹⁰⁷, disabled women¹⁰⁸ and young women already all experience heightened barriers to labour market participation, for many women paid work is no guarantee of income adequacy. Women predominate in sectors characterised by low paid and precarious work. 6 out of 10 low paid workers are women¹⁰⁹ with young people¹¹⁰ and lone parents¹¹¹ more likely to be low paid or National Minimum Wage (NMW) workers. DSP has a key role to play in supporting people to access decent work opportunities, and all labour activation policies must be gender and equality-proofed.

¹⁰² IHREC and ERSI (2018) [Caring and Unpaid Work in Ireland](#)

¹⁰³ SVP (2019) [Working, Parenting and Struggling?](#)

¹⁰⁴ Oireachtas Library & Research Services (2021) [L&RS Bill Digest: Family Law Bill 2021](#)

¹⁰⁵ OECD (2021) [OECD Family Database: F2.1. Parental Leave Systems](#)

¹⁰⁶ Migrants are more likely to experience unemployment. Ethnicity also plays a role with Black migrants experiencing higher unemployment than white migrants and working in lower skilled jobs, despite having higher educational attainment than those born in Ireland. ERSI (2020) [Origin and Integration: A Study of Migrants in the 2016 Irish Census](#)

¹⁰⁷ Traveller women are all but excluded from the workplace, with 80% of Traveller women unemployed. IHREC and ERSI (2017) [Who experiences discrimination in Ireland? Evidence from the QNHS Equality Modules](#)

¹⁰⁸ The labour force participation rate of disabled women is only 26% (compared to 35% for disabled men). CSO (2017) [Census 2016 - Profile 9 Health, Disability and Carers](#)

¹⁰⁹ Eurostat (2023) [Wages and Labour costs](#)

¹¹⁰ Low Pay Commission (2021) [Recommendations for the National Minimum Wage](#)

¹¹¹ ESRI and IHREC (2021) [Ireland's Young Workers 6 times More Likely to Be on Temporary Contracts than those over 25](#)

Deliver Pension Justice for Women

- **Make concrete steps to move towards a Universal State Pension system for all¹¹², benchmarked to maintain the relative value of the State pension compared to earnings growth and price inflation**
 - In the interim, increase the state pension by at least €25 in Budget 2024 towards a benchmark of 34% of average earnings within three years as called for by the Pension Promise Campaign – total cost €1.7bn¹¹³
- **Implement the Commission on Pensions recommendation on retrospective contributions for those caring for more than 20 years to ensure a full State Pension (Contributory)**
- **Acknowledge the previous injustice of the ‘marriage bar’ with a once-off, ring-fenced retrospective scheme**
- **Retain the current pension age of 66 years**
- **Ensure the Total Contributions Approach (TCA) is limited to 30 years for the maximum pension**
- **Ensure women born before 1st Sept 1946 can benefit under the Homemakers and Homecaring Periods schemes**

As women are more likely to be in low paid, part time jobs on precarious contracts, this makes it difficult to collect sufficient PRSI contributions to be eligible for the full State Pension (Contributory) and so women are more likely to be reliant on the State Pension (Non-Contributory) than men.¹¹⁴

It is NWC’s view that a universal state pension is the best way to support women and those who encounter barriers to the labour market, including disabled people, carers, lone parents, Travellers and Roma. In the interim, there are measures that can be taken in Budget 2024 to advance pension justice for women.

NWC maintains that the pension age should not be increased. Increasing the retirement age will have only a modest impact on containing spending growth¹¹⁵ but would disproportionately impact on women who are more reliant on the State pension.

¹¹² Per Social Justice Ireland ([Budget Choices: Pre-Budget Submission, Budget 2024](#)), cost of universalising the state pension and increasing it by €25 a week is €1.5bn.

¹¹³ Irish Senior Citizens’ Parliament (2023) [Get the FACTS about the state pension](#)

¹¹⁴ National Women’s Council of Ireland (2021) [Submission to the Commission on Pensions](#)

¹¹⁵ National Women’s Council of Ireland and Think Tank for Action and Social Change (TASC) (2022) [Submission to the Commission on Taxation and Welfare](#)

Section 4

Enabling Women's Participation and Decision Making

Invest in women's leadership and participation

- **Increase core funding to the National Women's Council to advance full equality for women on an All-Island basis**
- **Ringfence specific funding in future Peace Plus programmes in the form of a 'Women's Fund' for women's organisations working in the areas of peacebuilding, reconciliation, and north/south-cooperation on the island**

Women have been historically underrepresented in peacebuilding and decision-making spaces. Despite the many celebrations surrounding the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement this year, women's contribution to conflict prevention and peace remains undervalued and under-resourced.

The benefit of women's voices in peacebuilding and reconciliation, is well documented. Evidence demonstrates that supporting the inclusion of women in peace processes, both in official negotiating roles and grassroots efforts, significantly contributes to reaching lasting peace agreements and sustained peace.¹¹⁶

NWC's All Island Women's Forum provides a space for women on an all-island basis for cross border cooperation and dialogue. The Women's Forum also builds sustainable North South links, provides a space for marginalised communities, and builds better understanding and inter-community links.

In the wake of Brexit, the loss of EU funding to civil society organisations in the north has led to the closure of women's centres and schemes, negatively impacting some of the most marginalised groups in our society. The ongoing vacuum created by a lack of a functioning Executive continues to create a climate of precariousness among community organisations. The role of community and women's groups is crucial in supporting the participation of women from different backgrounds, and in particular women most distant from decision making processes, into political and public life including Traveller and Roma, migrant and refugee women, disabled women, young women and LGBTQ+ women.

We need specific ring-fenced funding within Peace Plus programmes by establishing a 'Women's Fund'.

¹¹⁶ Council on Foreign Relations (2022) [Women's Participation in Peace Processes](#)

Invest in inclusive and representative national and local government

- **Reform remuneration for Councillors by allowing childcare/care costs as an expenditure category for Councillors who have childcare, family or caring commitments**
- **Introduce Maternity Leave provision for members of the Oireachtas**
- **Increase funding for the development of local and regional Women's Caucuses**
- **Commit funding for a comprehensive gender and equality audit of all local, rural and community decision making structures**

Ensuring that the voices of women are included in decision making forums and that their contribution is supported and resourced is key to tackling gender inequalities. At the national level, this should include increased funding for the National Women's Council, recognised by Government as a key body advocating on women's concerns and perspectives, to continue to advance women's equality.

With its proximity to the lived experience of women, local government is uniquely positioned to strengthen women's participation in decision making processes and improve the representation of their interests – yet men hold 76% of local government seats.¹¹⁷ Local political experience is also a key route to national office for women, significantly more so than for men.

Local government provides essential services such as housing, roads, libraries, planning, environment, and economic development as well as being a key part of the functioning of our democratic system.

We are on the cusp of the next Local Elections 2024 and urgent action is required now to ensure that we have equal numbers of women and men on ballot papers in every local electoral area in the country. We are calling for the implementation of gender quotas at local government level and further investment in practical measures to make local government accessible to all.

Legislation and practical measures to ensure the inclusion of marginalised women, including Traveller and Roma women, working class women, disabled women, migrant women, the LGBTQ+ community and women in rural communities, must be introduced. These women often experience the impact of policy-making the most, and face additional barriers in achieving full and equal participation in public and political life.

Measures must be introduced to adequately resource local councils to develop more family friendly policies and procedures. This also means providing practical support for councillors with caring responsibilities allowing care costs to be included as an eligible expense.

Women councillors have sought to increase their influence through the development of local and regional caucuses across Ireland, enabling women to transcend party lines to share their experiences and support one another in running for and assuming elected office. Women's caucuses have proven to be important in securing progress on women's issues in local government across Ireland, and funding for these caucuses from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage needs to be sustainable into 2024 and beyond.

¹¹⁷ Central Statistics Office (2020) [Women and Men in Ireland 2019](#)

Invest in a sustainable community sector

- **Increase funding to ensure women’s community organisations are properly resourced**
- **Ensure funding for services and programmes provides meaningful employment with decent terms and conditions for workers, including:**
 - Pay scales commensurate with experience and qualifications in alignment with public sector peers
 - Pension provision, paid sick leave, and paid maternity leave
- **Provide multi-annual state funding to support community organisations to enable long term planning and staff recruitment and retention**

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

Overall, funding for women’s community organisations has been cut by 14.5% since 2008. While 83 out of 121 Family Resource Centres are not receiving a minimum level of core funding to remain operational.¹¹⁸ The Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme, the national social inclusion programme, had a budget of €84.7m in 2008 and in 2023 had a budget of €44m.¹¹⁹ This gap needs to be urgently addressed in the Government’s design of the new SICAP programme 2024+.

The women’s sector in Ireland has been the key driver in highlighting and addressing issues of isolation, economic dependency, poverty, violence, and powerlessness. Local women’s organisations enable women to participate in their communities, provide advice and counselling, enable access to education and training and help women experiencing domestic violence. They are essential to the foundation and wellbeing of society.

Women in rural communities experience additional barriers to participation, due to an underinvestment in social and public infrastructure.¹²⁰ Investment into rural communities, in particular, should be monitored and reported on with gender and equality disaggregated data.

Jobs in the community sector, predominantly held by women, continue to be insecure and low paid. Women working in this sector do not experience similar benefits to their female peers in the public and private sectors. Despite the significant progress made to narrow the gender pay gap, women leaders in the voluntary, community and charitable sector are being paid an average of 5.67% less than their male counterparts.¹²¹ Budget 2024 must recognise the role women and women’s groups continue to play in wider society.

¹¹⁸ The Wheel (2023) [Family Resource Centre National Forum call for 3.34 million in core funding](#)

¹¹⁹ Irish Local Development Work (2023) [Budget 2023: Protecting Communities & Promoting Social Inclusion](#)

¹²⁰ National Women’s Council (2021) [Paper on Women in Rural Communities](#)

¹²¹ The Wheel (2023) [An Exploration of the Gender Pay Gap in Community, Voluntary and Charitable Organisations 2023](#)

Section 5

A Just

Taxation and

Expenditure System

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 Summer Economic Statement¹²² has indicated the Government intend to increase spending by 6.1% over last year, with an additional €5.3bn in core spending, a €1.1bn tax package, €2.25bn in capital expenditure increases, and €4bn in non-core expenditure related to refugee supports and limited Covid-19 provision. The fiscal space for these increases is primarily as a result of unexpected excess corporation tax receipts. The National Women's Council welcomes the commitment to growth in expenditure, but cautions strongly against the introduction of tax cuts at a time when investment in the provision of public services to combat social and economic inequalities is so desperately needed. Further, it is imperative that the increase in core spending is focused on building the state's capacity to provide universal public services, tackle violence against women, and to supporting, through the social protection system, the most socially and economically marginalised in our society, among whom women are disproportionately represented.

The introduction of tax cuts at this time, particularly those directed at middle and high-income earners, is of considerable worry for the state's finances going forward, and for the impact on women in Ireland now and in the future. Tax cuts for higher earners mask a hidden regressive cost in reducing the resources available to government, in 2024 and beyond, to spend on essential public services that can help to address inequalities. It represents a further hollowing out of the tax base.

Last year's tax cuts skewed towards higher earners¹²³, while the ongoing problem of non-energy inflation¹²⁴ means that any tax cuts for those on middle incomes are likely to be quickly cancelled out by the increasing cost of living. For women, these tax cuts are particularly ineffective. Women are more likely to be lone parents, they 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.¹²⁵ Tax breaks are not effective if you're not making enough money to benefit from the reduction.

For any significant increases in core spending outside of building the state's public service provision, these increases should be targeted at moving towards benchmarking the social protection and pension rates to levels that allow for an adequate standard of living for all.

At a European level, the review of the European Union Fiscal Rules¹²⁶ should be supported by Ireland to provide greater flexibility to meet the service needs of individual countries like Ireland. These rules and their blanket debt-reduction requirements were the basis for austerity policies which irreparably damaged the lives of countless women. We spend less than other EU countries on both social protection and public services, and we need radical reform to ensure the flexibility to continue to build the public services we need.

The current windfall levels of revenue collected by the state are not predictably assured for the future, and that makes this moment even more pivotal. Now is exactly the time to invest in the future – now is the opportunity to ramp up the developing of universal public services and of a resilient, sustainable, gender-equal social infrastructure for the Ireland of the future.

¹²² Department of Finance and Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform (2023) [Summer Economic Statement 2023](#)

¹²³ Social Justice Ireland (2023) [Who has benefited from budget income tax changes?](#)

¹²⁴ Department of Finance (2023) [Stability Programme April 2023 Update](#)

¹²⁵ Central Statistics Office (2020) [Women and Men in Ireland 2019](#)

¹²⁶ European Commission (2023) [Economic Governance Review](#)

- **Standard rate pension tax relief – +€423m¹²⁷**

Tax expenditure on pensions is highly regressive and the State spends well over the OECD average on private pension tax breaks. These should be ended, and instead invested in a universal state pension.

- **End direct and indirect fossil fuel subsidies – +€2.2bn¹²⁸**

Fossil fuel subsidies were estimated at €2.2 billion in 2020. The majority of this is revenue foregone through exemptions to environmentally harmful fossil fuel, agriculture and transport activities.

- **Ensure VAT rate for the hospitality sector reverts to 13.5% in September 2023 – +€300m¹²⁹**

The extension of the reduced VAT rate for the hospitality sector until September 2023 is costly, and it comes while Ireland's hospitality sector is outperforming most other European countries.

- **Introduce a wealth tax at graduated rates on those with wealth above €4.7m – +€8.2bn**

Research from Oxfam shows that a tax on individuals with assets above €4.7m in Ireland would raise €8.2bn annually, at graduated rates of 2%, 3% and 5%.¹³⁰

- **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.¹³¹ An 1% increase in PRSI would increase revenue by €850m a year.¹³²

- **Introduce a Financial Transaction Tax (FTT) – +€350m¹³³**

Research suggests that an FTT discourages speculative finance whilst simultaneously generating revenue for investment in social infrastructure. Ireland should support calls for a progressive European FTT also.

- **Introduce a refundable tax credits system – €140m¹³⁴**

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% – +€1bn¹³⁵**

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.

¹²⁷ Revenue (2022) [Revenue Ready Reckoner – Post Budget 2023](#)

¹²⁸ Social Justice Ireland (2022) [Time to Review Fossil Fuel Subsidies](#)

¹²⁹ [PQ response to Holly Cairns TD 04/07/2023](#)

¹³⁰ Oxfam International (2023) [Survival of the Richest: How we must tax the super-rich now to fight inequality](#)

¹³¹ NERI (2021) [Submission to the Commission on Pensions](#)

¹³² Department of Finance (2019) [Letter to Brendan Howlin TD re budget costings \[2019-3\(A\)\]](#)

¹³³ Social Justice Ireland (2023) [Budget Choices: Pre-Budget Submission, Budget 2024](#)

¹³⁴ Social Justice Ireland (2023) [Budget Choices: Pre-Budget Submission, Budget 2024](#)

¹³⁵ Social Justice Ireland (2023) [Budget Choices: Pre-Budget Submission, Budget 2024](#)