

13th February 2023

NWC Submission on Design of the Next Iteration of the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) 2024+

Introduction

The National Women's Council is the leading national representative organisation for women and women's groups in Ireland. It was founded in 1973. We have more than 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. This ambition shapes and informs our work, and, with our living values, how we work.

We are a movement-building organisation rooted in our membership, working on the whole island of Ireland. We are also part of the international movement to protect and advance women's and girls' rights.

Our purpose is to lead action for the achievement of women's and girls' equality through mobilising, influencing, and building solidarity.

NWC look forward to continuing to work with the Department to offer our support and expertise on advancing equality for women at local level and to bring the voice and perspectives of our members.

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

Context

Our understanding of gender inequality is informed by the belief that women experience oppression on the basis of their gender. That is often compounded by other forms of systemic, systematic oppression and discrimination. Women are frequently doubly disadvantaged by policies that do not recognise their different realities and lived experiences, including low pay, being more likely to parent alone, responsibilities at work and home, and gender-based violence. Ireland still has a deeply gendered division of care within families and the lack of affordable, accessible childcare is still one of the greatest obstacles to women's equal participation in the workforce and in political life.

Women's equality is not a minority issue, the rights and needs of women cut across all sections of society. Women's equality concerns must not be segregated, but must be integral to planning processes, policy development and programme delivery. Women's interests and concerns cut across the full range of community and economic initiatives that are delivered through SICAP. It is imperative that their interests and concerns are articulated clearly in the next iteration of the programme. We support the processes being undertaken to review the current programme to ensure it is delivering for and reaching those who need it most and that it is evidence based. We must use all the opportunities available to us to make transformative decisions to address women's inequalities at local level, including firmly embedding

the principles of gender equality into our national anti-poverty and social inclusion programme.

Overall experience of SICAP

What is your organisations perspective of what works well within the current SICAP?

SICAP operates closest to women's lives, it can champion women's leadership and decision making in the community and voluntary sector and in local communities. As an employer of women, it can set a standard for good practice. NWC welcomes the year on year increases of women who access and benefit from the programme, particularly how the shift online during the pandemic has removed barriers for some women to engaging with the programme. We would recommend continuing with the blended approach whilst maintaining the drop in open-door access so important to engaging women in local communities. We note many positive examples of targeted work across both rural and urban based companies with women including direct support to women's groups, specific programmes with women on low incomes, lone parents and wellbeing and health supports.¹ The model employed by Southside Partnership (SSP) which has a dedicated SICAP-funded Women's programme Women4Women is one that could be mainstreamed throughout the programme.²

Analysis of the data is crucial to informing appropriate responses to women. The learning brief comparison was very welcome, in terms of understanding the needs and experiences of women and men who engage with the programme, such as how women hear about the supports available, the flexibility they need to return to the labour market whilst balancing care and family responsibilities, their interest in personal development and life long learning, women's availability to progress into employment and self/employment. The ability to take up full time paid employment or enterprise opportunities is directly related to the availability of childcare, eldercare, transport, domestic and family responsibilities and these must be factored into programme design and implementation.

What could be improved?

A specific, explicit focus and naming of women's social, economic, cultural and political equality and, in particular, the equality of marginalised women needs to be an overarching and underpinning principle of SICAP. An approach, which reflects the intersectionality of women's lives and experiences, should be embedded in all programme and policy design responses. Representation of women, and particularly women in disadvantaged or marginalised communities, must be incorporated into all stages of policy development, planning and programme delivery. This includes creating an enabling environment and addressing participation barriers. Creating access and opportunity for women's participation requires the facilitation of childcare

¹ <http://nekd.net/moving-on-project/>

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

² <https://women4women.ie/>

and other caring responsibilities is embedded into the operation and delivery of all programmes.

Where regional variation exists in terms of the numbers of women on the caseload and the beneficiaries, this needs to be explained. In a ESRI study in 2018, marked variation was found across Local Development Companies in the gender breakdown of individuals receiving support. Women formed more than half of participants in eight areas, most notably, Dublin Inner City and the area covered by IRD Duhallow. On the other hand, women made up only around a third of beneficiaries in Monaghan, Roscommon and Longford as well as Dublin North West.³

The needs of the community and the appropriate responses to those needs must be determined and assessed locally rather than centrally pre-determined and pre-defined programmes and targets. Community organisations need multi-annual funding given in a grant form to address the concerns of communities as identified by them.

Horizontal themes

Are these horizontal themes appropriate for the new SICAP programme and if not, how could they be improved?

Promoting an equality framework with a particular focus on gender equality and anti-discrimination practices should continue to be central to the next iteration. How this horizontal theme is reported on and evidenced is crucial to ensure it is embedded across all the functions and activities of the programme. In a previous ESRI study, only a third of Programme Implementers saw SICAP as effective or very effective in relation to gender equality. A significant minority felt they could not say how effective SICAP had been, particularly in relation to promoting gender equality and countering discrimination.⁴ There needs to be a greater focus on gender equality and the way in which gender equality intersects and overlaps with other forms of inequality. We would recommend that those who are working with marginalised and socially excluded women should take part in Anti-Racism and gender equality training. As women and men accessing these programmes are coming from various backgrounds/experiences, such as Traveller/Roma communities, it's important that those working with women have that training and knowledge, particularly because the experience of a Traveller or Roma woman is very different than that of a woman from the settled population. This can be further compounded based on a woman's nationality, sexual orientation, disability, etc. Gender proofing and assessment tools should form part of that equality framework.

³ ESRI(2018) The goals and governance of the social inclusion and community activation programme (sicap) 2015-2017a mixed methods study Merike Darmody and Emer Smyth

⁴ ibid

Collaboration is one of the horizontal themes that underpins SICAP – what does and should effective collaboration look like in practice and how can the new SICAP programme ensure effective collaboration with target groups, representative organisations, local community groups and/ or other local service providers?

It is important that Local Development companies are developing responses in collaboration with grassroots representative organisations including women's groups such as Women's Collective Ireland and disabled people's organisations.

Local Development Companies need to engage in more collaboration on a regional basis. They also need to be more involved in national campaigning on issues of concern. LDCs should play a stronger role in challenging agencies and services. They need to go to the limit of their roles on behalf of and in solidarity with marginalised communities.

Target groups

Are these target groups reflective of the most disadvantaged within Irish society today? If not, what groups should be added to/ excluded from the list and why?

What target groups should be prioritised for support within the new programme and why?

Intersectionality- The Reality of Women's Lives

The women of Ireland are diverse and diversity for NWC includes – but is not limited to - disabled women, migrant women, women of colour, lone parents, women experiencing poverty, addiction and homelessness, women from working class communities and the LGBTQI+ community, women of all faiths and none, Traveller and Roma women, women from other ethnic minorities, women in prostitution and survivors of gender-based violence and trauma, survivors of institutional abuse, young women and older women, rural women, women in prisons, undocumented women and women living in Direct Provision. Although all may share the experience of gender inequality, women may also experience others forms of inequality and discrimination depending on other aspects of their lives and identities. Some women may experience double or cumulative disadvantage as a result of being both a woman and a member of another target group or a disadvantaged community.

It is crucial that we record and report on women's participation and engagement in SICAP. Currently disadvantaged women are a named target group however the numbers of disadvantaged women being recorded are low as they are being recorded under other target groups. Our analysis is that Women are disadvantaged because of their gender and should not be asked to specify the reason for recording purposes on IRIS. The individual beneficiary form should allow for participants to tick one or more target groups so that the profile of women participating can be captured. Gender disaggregated data should be collected and made available across all target groups.

We are requesting that Pobal considers the inclusion of those over the age of 65 as a target group in the next iteration of the SICAP. Adults over the age of 65 are at increased risk of social isolation, digital exclusion and mental health issues. Older women in particular are more likely to live alone, experience financial insecurity and chronic health conditions. They experience higher rates of depression and higher incidences of dementia.⁵ For example, older women are more at risk of poverty and social exclusion than older men. As women age they are less likely to remain in paid employment, with only 29% of women aged over 65 in paid employment compared to 71% of men.⁶

In relation to the setting of five additional national priority groups identified in a mid-programme review in 2021, NWC raised issues with this selection of these priority groups particularly drawing attention to the gender-blind nature of this prioritisation and complete lack of gender analysis. The selection omitted evidence and analysis of inequalities experienced by women, specifically the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women. Neither did it apply the horizontal principle of gender equality; “Promoting an equality framework with a particular focus on gender equality and anti-discrimination practices.”

Beneficiaries

Is the list of beneficiary types appropriate and, if not, how might it be improved for the current programme?

The programme must focus on the analysis of public expenditure and investment from a gender perspective, identifying the implications of spending on women and men. This should include identification of specific budgets for targeting marginalised women. Flexibility should be retained in goal apportionment to ensure a balanced approach to collective work and equal outcomes for women and men.

The recorded work with women community groups has been consistently low. The programme could benefit from a similar analysis that was carried out with individual beneficiaries as to the causes of such persistent low engagement. Work with individual women must be balanced with collective work in order to bring about structural change in deeply rooted social and economic disadvantage experienced in many communities. It must seek to effect meaningful change and influence for marginalised women. If the numbers of women’s groups are low and the reported indicators of supporting their participation in decision making is low, this is a huge gap in terms of addressing the persistent underrepresentation of women, particularly marginalised women in public and political life.

⁵ Women's Health in Ireland Evidence base report

<https://assets.gov.ie/34221/1896ea11479242e09073d5c78098dff4.pdf>

⁶ Age Action Reframing Ageing The State of Ageing in Ireland 2022

https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/reframing_ageing_state_of_ageing_in_ireland_2022_published.pdf

Thematic areas and outcomes

How could the new programme Monitoring Framework better capture programme outcomes, with due regard for the need for national level data on programme progress and achievement, as well as the need to limit the administration burden placed on programme implementers?

Gender disaggregated data must be included in socio-economic profiles to inform planning and development in individual local development companies. Ascertaining the goal and what data we need to measure and capture to show we are meeting our goal should be central to programme evaluation. Data collection must be compatible with community work approaches and focus on capturing meaningful participation and outcomes across a number of indicators. It must be collected in a way that is empowering, shows outcomes and is collective in nature. Programme outcomes need to be measured in terms of outcomes for women, particularly marginalised and socio-economically disadvantaged women. In addition, the impact of programmes and actions on women need to be measured. Women, for example, make up a significant percentage of those engaged but the extent to which the programme is impacted on gender equality in local communities is not clear.

Intersectionality can be used as an analytical tool for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersect with other personal characteristics/identities, and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of discrimination. Qualitative measurement and tools could be developed to capture intersectional discrimination or hidden disadvantage such as – language and cultural barriers, mothers with large families and experiencing overcrowding and transgender people. It's important that numbers are recorded and that there is follow up particularly for ethnic minority groups such as Travellers and Roma so they are visible and we can measure the impact and outcomes for different communities.

Those charged with oversight and implementation of the programme including Local Authorities and Local Community Development Committee members must develop and increase their understanding of community work. This would support a greater focus on the impact of the work and the importance of measuring the outcomes and impacts for marginalised groups. According to a review of Local Community Development Committees (LCDC) in 2019, there were considerable disparities in relation to gender balance on LCDCs, with one LCDC where 94% of members were men. Over half of LCDCs said there was no equality proofing of their work happening either. Gender and equality expertise should be required on all monitoring and implementation bodies.

The numbers of interventions can vary yet only two are counted for statistical purposes. This does not capture the time and process required to meaningful engage with a woman. Time needed to do developmental work must be factored in

for meaningful relationships and trust to be developed to ensure that the most marginalised can benefit from the programme. Interventions must be designed so that the women can participate in developmental processes that can lead to, decision making and influence for women from marginalised backgrounds in local communities. The external setting of targets does not align with a community development approach where local communities identify their own needs and strategies to tackle issues.

The programme must be cognisant of the commitments in the current National Strategy for Women and Girls. It is the primary policy document State addressing key areas of concern for women in Ireland as social and economic actors, carers, service-users and decision-makers.

Action 4.6:

In the context of supporting a greater focus on women's participation and on gender issues at community level, SICAP will provide key supports to those most in need in our communities, including disadvantaged women, Traveller and Roma women and women with disabilities, in all Local Authority areas throughout the country. Programme Implementers (PIs) will also ensure gender equality is reflected in their own internal practices regarding their employees and relationships with sub-contractors and suppliers, etc. This will depend on PIs reflecting on their human resources processes to tackle unconscious gender bias and to create a workplace where both women and men can advance into leadership position. (pg. 59)

Key performance indicators

All indicators should be disaggregated by gender wherever possible. This will help identify the gender differentiated impact of the interventions to measure positive impacts and outcomes for women. Gender equality indicators are not simply a list of additional measurements, but rather sit alongside indicators designed to reveal other issues – socio-economic, environmental, rural, etc. – and are cross-cutting within existing frameworks.

Sample indicators could include:

- % of men and women chairpersons and chief executives of Local development companies,
- nos of active women's organisations,
- level of support for women's groups,
- capture whether participation is having positive collective outcomes for women affected by poverty,
- capture whether pathways to participation and influence are open to marginalised women,
- self-reported indicators – how women feel about their own lives, perceptions and confidence for example are important for women, what does success look like for women, not always tied to securing employment due to issues with

women dominated sectors of work that are associated with low pay and precarity and balancing care responsibilities,

- what do we want the position of women to be in the future and?
- are those involved in project implementation taking part in opportunities to upskill their gender and equality expertise?

Community Development approaches

The emphasis on community development underpinning the programme is crucial. More recognition is needed for this approach to build on the positives of SICAP II. This must include community work education, qualifications and training for community workers in SICAP. NWC want to see recognition for community development both as a principle and approach for working with women experiencing poverty and marginalisation. Building and supporting community development for women experiencing disadvantage requires the development of collective action by marginalised communities to redress inequalities within broader society and local communities. This means the creation of decision-making processes which enable women and their communities to define their own needs and to bring about change in response to these needs.

We consider community development to be a key strategy to facilitate marginalised and socio-economically disadvantaged women to enjoy full participation in public life and address inequality. Community work has always had a strong gender dimension – work done with women by women, creating spaces for women to talk about their personal experiences, finding common ground and linking the personal to the political through the development of critical thinking. Women have led change in local communities bringing their own particular skills, styles and determination. It is about creating spaces for women to talk about their personal experiences, finding common ground and linking the personal to the political through the development of critical thinking. It has supported women to explore their lived experience and to work collectively on achieving full and equal participation in Irish society.

Those involved in delivering the programme and its participants could be facilitated to translate the data and learning into strategies for advocacy at a national level. Workers do not have the time to engage in policy and advocacy work. The focus on individual work within the programme is detrimental to developmental work that can enable mobilisation, politicisation and gender analysis around the country. What is required is support for organisations to deliver initiatives and programmes that build women's participation, leadership and recognition in the community.

Key emerging areas for consideration

Climate change

International research has established that as these climate impacts increase, existing inequalities, deprivation and exclusion will be worsened, with the worst impacts on women. Our transition must be just and all measures must incorporate mitigation and climate justice investments to ensure rural communities, households experiencing energy poverty or lower socio-economic groups do not experience further inequality and poverty. Acting against the issues faced in regards to climate change is necessary at the community, local, national, regional and international levels. Climate action is also, and perhaps mostly, necessary in terms of achieving gender equality. Having women in the position of decision-maker in terms of policy is the only way to have the response we need to make mitigation and adaptation strategies efficient and sustainable. This programme has a role to play in ensuring that those who have contributed least to the crisis do not bear the burnt of climate mitigation and adaption measures.

Mental health

Women are more reliant on public health services which often have long waits. Women generally provide most family care in Ireland, looking after children and older family members. The impact of these caring responsibilities can be detrimental to women's participation in paid employment, with consequences in older age of risk of poverty, poorer access to health and social care services and poor health.

We know, through our direct contact with women, that mental health is a central issue in their lives. This is as a result of many factors such as the impact of gender stereotypes and roles, the pressure to conform, negative body image and instances of sexual harassment and abuse. Additionally, we know that marginalised women such as asylum seekers, women experiencing homelessness, Traveller and Roma women, LGBTQI women and disabled women are disproportionately impacted by poor mental health. Not only are women struggling with their own anxiety they are also trying to manage children's anxieties and maybe older relatives and neighbours.

These experiences are particularly acute for women from minority ethnic backgrounds. Racial and gender injustice and inequality, including institutional racism, impacts on women's mental health. Having to hide one's identity has serious consequences for the dignity and quality of life for members of the Traveller community:

- Suicide rates among Traveller women are five times higher than women in the general population.
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- 63% of Traveller Women disclosed that their mental health was not good for one or more days in the previous 30 days; this compared to 20% of female medical cardholders⁷

Violence against women

Gender based violence should be of particular concern in a programme that aims to address social exclusion. The prevalence and impact of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence makes it a key contributor towards poverty, social exclusion and, indeed, long-term unemployment, as well as being a root cause of many other ailments in our communities such as physical and mental ill health, parenting issues and participation in the workforce and in society. Economic security and development are key to providing women with independence and autonomy, but without the appropriate planning, processes and implementation they are at risk of further marginalising already deeply disadvantaged communities.

Governance and decision making

Women are actively involved in local communities in a paid and unpaid capacity yet often they are invisible in local decision-making structures. There are women's groups and groups representing women's interests across the country. There is a real opportunity for their voices, experiences and perspectives to be invited and supported within SICAP. Women make up less than 40% on 2/3 of the boards of Local Development Companies.⁸ 29% of chairpersons of LDCs are women. The national social inclusion programme must show strong leadership in meeting and exceeding the target for gender balance on their boards, supporting women in leadership roles as well as championing women's equality across all their programmes. Gender composition and representation of women should be audited. These results should be published and made widely available. Where underrepresentation continues to exist, remedial action must be taken as a matter of urgency to address succession planning and barriers to participation. All policy/steering groups responsible for decisions on community development and local development, should achieve a 40% quota of women representatives who can speak to the needs of their communities and can contribute an equality lens that considers the experiences of women living in poverty or social or geographic isolation. This should include a plan around supporting a diverse membership, achieving a critical mass of women around the table as well as women in senior roles such as Chairperson. Enforcement mechanisms are needed to complement gender targets or quotas in order to ensure compliance, such as a comply or explain rule. This should be achieved by making concrete national commitments on composition, function, terms of reference and standing orders of those committees and groups. The programme should consider specific positive action measures for different groups of women for example reserved seats for Traveller and minority ethnic women. The programme could be more active in supporting the emergence of independent representative organisations for Travellers, disabled people and others to join the board and be influential in the programme.

Tendering

Commissioning should not be seen as a replacement for the need or duty for public delivery of public services or the democratic importance of community development and participation. Equality and human rights can in no sense be considered as an optional add on but must run clearly through all aspects of public procurement policy and practice. It is important that the option of grant giving outside of procurement processes constraints be sustained where that is a more appropriate approach. Recent research published by Maynooth University and Community Work Ireland called for more consideration and exploration on the longer-term impacts on service users and standards for staff.⁹ It is important that not-for-profit organisations that not only provide services, but also make a wider social and economic contribution within their communities, including in some cases, through an advocacy role, should be protected and supported rather than undermined by national procurement process.

Next Programme

The next iteration of the programme needs to consider:

1. a specific, explicit focus and naming of women's social, economic, cultural and political equality and, in particular, the equality of marginalised women needs to be an overarching and underpinning principle of the next programme,
2. intersectional discrimination, and recognition of the cumulative impact of multiple discriminations and inequalities,
3. a cost/benefit analysis of the current competitive tendering process for the allocation of SICAP implementation contracts,
4. representation of all women, and particularly women in disadvantaged or marginalised communities, must be incorporated into all stages of policy development, planning and programme delivery,
5. programme outcomes need to be measured in terms of outcomes for women, particularly marginalised and socio-economically disadvantaged women. In addition, the impact of programmes and actions on women need to be measured,
6. support and resource capacity building and upskilling of workers, and those charged with oversight of the programme in the local government sector in community development and gender equality,
7. a comprehensive gender audit and composition of all decision-making structures should be carried out, and
8. requirement for collection of local gender and equality disaggregated data taking into account the qualitative and less tangible nature of desired impacts and outcomes

⁷ Pavee Point, Presentation 'Our Geels: Mental Health and Suicide,'. Presentation to the World Congress on Women's Mental Health, Dublin, March 2017.

⁸ <https://www.noteworthy.ie/across-the-board-governance-5949728-Jan2023/>

⁹ WINNERS AND LOSERS? The social marketisation of civil society. Scoping the impact of Commissioning and Procurement on civil society services and advocacy: public employment services, community development, domestic violence and housing first. By Mary Murphy, Ann Irwin, Michelle Maher March 2020