

The background is a solid purple color with several large, abstract, organic shapes in a lighter shade of purple and a vibrant green. A bright green circle is positioned in the upper right quadrant, and another green circle is partially visible on the left edge.

September 2022

Results of NWC's Online Survey with Women in Rural Ireland

Introduction

The National Women's Council 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. Guided by our Strategic Plan 2021-2024, No Woman Left Behind, our mission is to lead and to be a catalyst for change in the achievement of equality for women. Our vision is of an Ireland and of a world where women can achieve their full potential and where there is full equality for women.

We would like to thank all the women who generously completed this survey, ensuring their experiences of living in rural Ireland could be documented.

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Women in rural Ireland

Women's lives are diverse in rural communities; with multiple and crosscutting layers of discrimination that are not always acknowledged in policy making or in how women are represented. 37% of women in Ireland live in rural areas.¹ Poverty and social exclusion; demographic change; migration, lack of educational and employment opportunities and a lack of services and facilities such as broadband, are challenges for all rural dwellers. However, women living in rural Ireland are more likely to experience poverty, assume the responsibility and of care and experience additional obstacles as victims of violence. Women face particular barriers to participation in public and political life in rural communities and more progress is required to achieve parity in all decision-making spaces. For women from marginalised backgrounds, these challenges are compounded.

Summary of survey Findings

As part of our planning and preparations to host a national conference to celebrate International Day of Rural Women, NWC released an online survey hosted on the Survey Monkey platform inviting women in rural Ireland to share their views to inform the conference discussions and the development of a charter. The survey ran for 3 weeks (5th September - 23rd September 2022). The survey was completed anonymously by 801 women. This was shared across our social media platforms and by email to our subscribers and supporters. There were ten questions and the survey combined a mixture of multiple-choice questions and open text options. Questions focused on important issues for women and what they would like to see addressed to ensure equality for all women. This provided a snapshot of women's experiences in their own words.

¹ CSO 2016 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp3oy/cp3/urr/>

About the women who participated in the survey

Not all women answered all questions in the survey. The majority of women who responded to the survey **(58%) were aged between 35 – 54 years old**. 18% were between 25 – 34 years; 21% over 55 years. **54% of women resided in the countryside** and 45% were residing in a rural town or village. 18% of women stated they had a disability or a chronic condition. The majority of the responses identified as White (Irish, Other European and Non-European). **54% of women were working full time**, 20% working part time for payment and 13% were looking after home/family.

Overview of findings

What are the most important issues for you living and working in rural Ireland?

Transport, road safety and isolation

Transport is frequently cited as a barrier to women's economic, social, political and cultural participation. Out of 748 responses, 60% pointed out that there was insufficient public transport infrastructure in terms of availability, access, cost and frequency. Of those most concerned about transport, 77% were working full time, part time or in education. Women were concerned with the conditions of the roads which presented a challenge for commuting and impacted on the decision to choose active travel modes of transport. In rural areas, there are many roads where no safe walking infrastructure is provided, resulting in limited options for those who wish to move on foot or need to use the footpath to access bus stops. In tandem with a lack of accessible and affordable childcare, this impacts directly on both work and education opportunities for women as well as impacting on isolation and loneliness.

NWC is concerned that transport facilities and active travel options fall short of an inclusive approach and neglect the needs of women from minority ethnic groups, women living on low incomes and disabled women. There is a need for ambitious action to develop a more diverse and inclusive transport infrastructure to unlock women's equality in rural Ireland.

"Transportation is a huge issue for many reasons as this ultimately impacts every other issue that impacts living rurally. Particularly if there are barriers to having a car."

"For women from ethnic minorities, disabled, Traveller and Roma women – it is much harder to access a car or transport."

"Access to affordable transport options if I can't drive for some reason. Access to school transport and childcare for my children so I can continue to work full time. Isolation, I live far from my family in the area my partner is from. His brother lives with us and I work from home so do not have local colleagues."

"Transport costs to and from work, with no realistic public transport option. No taxi service to speak of locally so no social life unless you drive and don't take a drink"

"Struggling with loneliness and isolation - it hard to meet people when the population is so low, and it's a long drive to the bigger towns etc. This goes for friendships and relationships."

Broadband

25% of women mentioned the lack of service and unreliability of internet provision which led to challenges for participation in employment and education and to combatting isolation.

“Decent Internet is critical to being able to work in a rural location, it's also critical to avoid isolation, as someone who is medically vulnerable and need to be able to isolate at times but also stay connected to avoid becoming more lonesome, sad, and isolated.”

“Internet connections and electricity are liable to go due to poor weather conditions which during the wintertime are very prevalent.”

Cost of Living

Cost of living was of concern to 20% of respondents when combined with **childcare and housing costs** and lower incomes. There was also increasing concern about the rising costs of fuel both in terms of heating homes and running cars.

“Very poor access to childcare locally. Our childminder closed down so I had to send my child to school a year earlier than planned, meaning she missed one year of ECCE. I have to take unpaid time off work (I am a healthcare professional) to mind the children due to lack of childcare. No access to public transport. I work four days a week, with the help of parental leave one day a week but this is unpaid.”

“Childcare for women is crucial and the lack of childcare is a barrier for many women and families. Housing and accommodation are a huge issue - lack of housing and accommodation is putting women in a strenuous position. Structural issues seep through society and impact those most marginalised.”

“limited provision of childcare options. The village heavily relies on a few childminders and a number of housing estates are underway or in the pipeline - yet there are no plans for childcare/increased school places...”

“The house I've rented for over 20 years as a single parent because I couldn't get a mortgage has mica.”

“Childcare is so expensive coupled with the cost of fuel; I cannot afford to work. rate of pay is significantly lower outside of the larger cities which, given current inflation, is not in line with cost of living standards.”

“Provide adequate pension for those of us who have lost out due to family caring, losing our career due to the marriage bar, etc and index link the state pension for all.”

“There is currently no childcare service available to me at present and I am undergoing chemo with 2 small children. Allow women who are sick during their maternity leave to access illness benefit and save maternity leave.”

““Rural Ireland is no place for younger women with ambition. The lack of childcare pushes us further into our homes and robs us of any chance of forging a career or social life. It is utterly miserable.”

“there is no public transport for young people, so they are dependent on parents, often women, to drive them to any activity. This is a massive time resource drain...”

Feeling safe

Domestic violence against women in rural areas is more hidden and can be a contributing factor to homelessness. Gender based violence is compounded and enabled by the greater prevalence of economic dependency, stigma in accessing support services, lack of culturally appropriate services for Traveller and Roma women and the geography and distance of where support services are located. Nine counties in Ireland have no dedicated refuge for women and their children.

“Personal safety, I haven’t walked alone since Ashling Murphy passed away.”

“Feeling safe in your area, like if you are going for a run or out and about.”

“Safety - living in quieter more isolated areas means constant vigilance to the threat of burglary/break ins and as a woman that can be quite intimidating to be working from home alone all day.”

“Isolation is a close second as with regards to personal safety, Violence Against Women and health and wellbeing all of this is exacerbated by rural living. An awareness of the public to this is not what it could be i.e. domestic violence in a rural home, access to refuges etc.”

“...feeling safe in my area and ensuring other young woman feel they can live their lives freely and happily too, it can feel impossible to be yourself in smaller towns in Ireland”

Healthcare

The provision of healthcare was mentioned frequently with GPs not being able to take on more patients, affordability, emergency services, mental health services as well the impact of worry about being able to access services.

“Very poor access to health clinics...physical, mental and dental. Health....access to GPs, transport to hospitals, parking must be free, serious need for 24-hour scanning services in hospitals, referrals straight to consultants without 5 layers of administration, much greater efficiency in hospitals, address the waiting lists to prevent serious illness brought on by untimely diagnosis and action. Keep women healthy!”

“No access to health care, I've been on a waiting list for 1 year with a GP practice and still no GP...”

“For us it’s a 3/4hr round trip to Tralee for decent healthcare, local doctors are limited and there are no female doctors working in the locality.”

“Ensure hospitals take account of long travel times for rural patients and stop giving them early morning appointments that are very difficult to get to.”

“Disabled women from Rural Ireland are significantly impacted by these factors. Lack of services is also a concern - the impact on one’s wellbeing while not having sufficient social supports or mental health supports is huge...”

Participation of women in decision making

Respondents felt it was important to engage and encourage women to engage with their local communities and have services they can easily access. Access to larger towns or shops and social activities were also highlighted while also acknowledging balancing of day-to-day life with time pressures that predominantly affect women.

“Ask what’s important to rural women and listen.”

“It's so isolated. There is nothing here to enjoy that you don't have to drive an hour for. No real competition for groceries so has to travel to get to Lidl. Nothing for teens outside of GAA or other physical sports. The constant travelling to feel like we're in modern Ireland.”

“Ensure that policy is gender proofed and that the intersections of equality are considered when making decisions on our behalf. Ensure that rural women's voices are heard and make it accessible to ensure women from all backgrounds enter the decision-making fora...”

“We probably do need a quota system for women candidates in Local and National government but also changes that would make public life more acceptable to women with family responsibilities”

“It's essential that any solutions to the problems that rural women face are made in consideration of those rural women who are most at risk of exclusion, isolation or danger. The voices of rural working-class women, rural disabled women, rural migrant women, rural LGBTQ+ women, rural women of colour - these should all be listened to before attempts are made to solve our problems. Too often we are presented with solutions that can actually make a problem worse. Something is considered 'fixed' and those excluded from the solution are left to fend for themselves, with decision-makers considering it a job done.”

“Be conscious when scheduling events of timing, location. Recognise that the challenges facing rural women are different to urban.”

What needs to happen to ensure equality for all women in rural Ireland?

This is what women who completed the survey are calling for.

“Ensure every woman has equal access to the support and health care services they need regardless of where they are based”

- Address and acknowledge the impact of the cost of living and energy crisis which would include practical support for families
- Investment in healthcare, public transport and broadband
- Affordable housing
- Decent flexible jobs and employment and education options locally
- Investment in care across the life cycle
- Outreach and locally based services including gardai, community centres, education, shops, banks and post offices and health.

