

11 November, 2024

General Election Manifesto 2024

Supporting policy document

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Women's rights and gender equality must be at the forefront of the upcoming general election. Women and girls continue to face significant social and economic inequalities, with marginalised women facing additional challenges. Women are facing a housing and homelessness crisis, a cost-of-living crisis, a public services crisis in terms of access to essential services like childcare, health and social care – and the ongoing effects of the climate and biodiversity emergency. There is an epidemic of violence against women, and a growth in far-right violence and hate, with a deeply anti-women sentiment. The general election is pivotal for women, and the commitments that follow in the next Programme for Government has the potential to set us on a path towards real gender equality. The next Government must commit to tackling the widespread systemic gender inequalities we face - and fully address the needs of all women and girls in our society. Only with vision, real ambition, and a commitment to gender equality can we achieve the Ireland we all want to see.

1. Transform Women's Health

Guarantee universal healthcare for all women and girls

A universal health care system is essential in ensuring all women and girls can access the care they need, when they need it, without incurring undue financial hardship. The provision of universal healthcare is a feminist issue due to the structural inequalities that women face 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, face significant barriers to timely high-quality care in a privatised system, widening existing health inequalities.¹ Sláintecare, our national framework for moving from a two-tier system to universal health and social care, has the potential to improve the health outcomes of all women by mapping population profiles and prioritising the provision of high-quality services and supports.

Key recommendations

- Commit at least 10% of the annual health budget's allocation to the delivery and expansion of universal health care
- Publish the 2024–2027 Sláintecare Framework and 2025 Action Plan by Q1 2025
- Develop patient-centred care models to ensure better primary and community care
- Expand GP visit cards to children 8-10 years and older and to households where the median household income is €55,149 or less
- Extend the chronic disease management programme to women aged 18+ years who are diagnosed with gestational diabetes or pre-eclampsia, among other chronic conditions

¹ National Women's Council (2019) [Evidence Base for the Development of the Women's Health Action Plan.](#)

Investment in women’s health services

NWC has supported the Department of Health for several years to develop the first ever Women’s Health Action Plan (2023-2024) and the subsequent successor Plan (2024-2025). While positive steps have been taken, such as in relation to free contraception, and fertility treatments, more is needed to bridge the stark health inequalities experienced by marginalised women. This includes the health needs of migrant women, Traveller and Roma women, LGBTIQ+ individuals, disabled women, and women who have experienced homelessness, addiction, and gender-based violence. The principles of the new Women’s Health Action Plan are to “Listen, Invest and Deliver”. In doing so, the Department must adopt a targeted approach to ensure the experiences and perspectives of all women are included. Continued advancements are also needed in the areas of reproductive health (menopause, maternal, menstrual, and fertility treatment), as well as sexual health, mental health and chronic diseases.

Key recommendations

- Allocate secure multi-annual funding to women’s health services to support the implementation and further development of the Women’s Health Action Plan
- Address the health inequalities experienced by marginalised women by developing targeted, and cultural humility practices in health services embedded with equality data collection
- Continue to roll out the free contraception scheme to people of all ages, beyond the current 17-35 year cohort
- Implement the recommendations of the Independent Review on Abortion by ensuring no woman or pregnant person has to travel for essential reproductive health care
- Expand publicly funded fertility services with the establishment of a Public Assisted Human Reproductive Treatment Centre
- Support referrals pathways to Specialist Menopause Clinics and increase their capacity

Deliver gender sensitive mental health services that meet all women and girl’s needs

The World Health Organisation considers gender to be a critical determinant of mental health. Research demonstrates that many of the risk factors for experiencing mental health difficulties, including – poverty, violence, low socioeconomic status, insecure employment, and responsibility for care of others – disproportionately impact women.² Gender has also been shown to affect how mental distress presents, in addition to support needs, and access to and experiences of mental health care. This is particularly true for marginalised women – including Traveller and Roma women – who face additional structural barriers such as racism and discrimination. . Despite the mental health crisis worsening in Ireland in recent years, this Government has not come close to meeting the Sláintecare target for mental health funding to be 10% of the overall health expenditure, with current investment remaining at less than 6%.³ The new Government must rectify this, by resourcing a gender-sensitive implementation of Sharing the Vision to reform our mental health system and improve mental health outcomes for all women and girls living in Ireland.

Key recommendations

- Commit to a long-term funding strategy which brings the mental health allocation to +10% of the overall health budget by 2030
- Reinststate a national leadership role for mental health in the HSE to ensure oversight and leadership in service improvements including the delivery of gender sensitive mental health services

² NWC (2023) *Gender-sensitive Mental Health*.

³ Department of Health. (2024, October 9). [Minister for Mental Health and Older People announces Budget 2025 funding increases](#). Government of Ireland.

- Deliver on gender-sensitive mental health services through full implementation of Sharing the Vision, ensuring services and staff are resourced through training, education, policies and systems to promote gender sensitivity, complemented by cultural humility and trauma informed practices

Fast-track the establishment of Ireland's first Mother and Baby Unit

One in five women will experience perinatal mental health difficulties during pregnancy or up to one year after giving birth. While a very small proportion will experience severe or complex mental health difficulties (approx. 2-4 per 1,000),⁴ with an even smaller number requiring hospital admission, there is no dedicated Mother and Baby Unit in Ireland. The HSE's Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Model of Care (2017), includes a clear commitment to the establishment of an MBU,⁵ however this core component of the model has failed to be delivered. Currently, women who need in-patient care following childbirth are separated from their babies. MBUs are critical in keeping mothers and their babies together, delivering mental health care to women, and nurturing and supporting the mother-infant relationship.

Key recommendations

- Establish Ireland's first Mother & Baby Unit at the previously approved site at St. Vincent's University Hospital, Dublin. to provide in-patient care and support for mothers experiencing very severe and complex perinatal mental health difficulties
- Increase investment in the development and implementation of an updated Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Model of Care to ensure strengthening and resourcing of all specialist perinatal mental health services, as well as supports at primary care level and in the community, recognising the increasing demand and pressure on existing services
- Invest in research and data collection on the experiences of ethnic minority and migrant women to improve perinatal mental health services for all women, underpinned by practices of cultural humility, gender sensitivity and trauma informed care

2. Guarantee Reproductive Rights

Ensure direct access to safe, local, legal abortion for all who need it

At least 1,117 women have travelled from Ireland to Britain for an abortion since 2018.⁶ This is a stark figure which represents the ongoing barriers to timely, equitable, and accessible abortion services in Ireland. Marie O'Shea's 2023 review of Ireland's abortion provision noted the significant barriers women face when trying to access abortion care.⁷ While some progress has been made to improve the geographical coverage – with 17 out of 19 maternity hospitals now providing care – issues like criminalisation, the mandatory 3-day wait and geographical blackspots impinge upon women's right to reproductive health care. The Independent Review on abortion provides us with a significant opportunity, rooted in the lived experiences of women, pregnant people and service providers to tackle the legal and operational barriers to access. The next Government must progress the development of abortion policy, in line with these lived experiences, evolving international guidance (including recent guidance from the WHO) and best clinical practice on reproductive rights and abortion care. NWC is calling for the urgent

⁴ Health Service Executive. (2017). [Specialist perinatal mental health services model of care.](#)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Office for National Statistics. (2024). [Abortion statistics for England and Wales 2022.](#) Government of the United Kingdom.

⁶ Dublin Rape Crisis Centre. (2024). [Annual report 2023.](#)

⁷ Government of Ireland. (2023). [The independent review of the operation of the Health \(Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy\) Act 2018.](#)

implementation of the O’Shea recommendations as well as expanding and enhancing abortion care more broadly for all who need it.

Key recommendations

- Full decriminalisation of abortion in line with World Health Organisation (WHO) guidance to remove the chilling effect on healthcare providers, ensuring that they can use their clinical judgment to care for patients without fear of prosecution
- Remove the mandatory three day wait period to ensure timely access to abortion care
- Review the 12-weeks gestational limit and enable abortion on request up to viability to ensure that no woman or pregnant person is forced to travel abroad for essential reproductive healthcare
- are guaranteed compassionate care in their own country
- Broaden coverage to ensure access to abortion care in all communities nationwide through primary care and maternity hospitals settings

Extend the Free Contraception Scheme to all ages

Research conducted by Dublin Well Woman in 2020 found that many women face barriers when trying to access affordable and appropriate forms of contraception.⁸ While the financial burden has been significantly reduced since the introduction of the Free Contraception Scheme in 2022, NWC continues to call for this Scheme to be available to people of all ages. Universal access to contraception is fundamental to reproductive health and critical for achieving gender equality. In the NHS (UK), free contraception is available to all, including adolescents. To promote reproductive rights, women must have real contraceptive choice and access to the most effective forms of contraception. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the rising costs of living and ensuring marginalised groups of women benefit from targeted initiatives.

The expansion of the Scheme would also ensure that women and people identifying as transgender or non-binary would have access to a service which covers the cost of consultations with GPs, family planning, student health and primary care centres, and prescriptions for a wide range of contraceptive options. The Scheme has been a success to date with almost 2,400 GPs and 2,050 pharmacies taking part, and more than 189,000 women accessing free contraceptive services in 2023.⁹

Key recommendations/indicators

- Continue to roll out the free contraception scheme to people all ages (beyond the current age cohort of 17-35 years)

Fully resource and integrate relationships and sexuality education within SPHE

A new junior cycle SPHE curriculum commenced in schools in September 2023, followed by the Senior Cycle curriculum one year later. The primary school consultation concluded June 2024 and is expected to be implemented in 2025/26. The SPHE curricula has the potential to transform young people’s perceptions of gender and gender stereotypes and prevent gender-based violence. Research shows that Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) leads to healthier relationships, improves self-esteem, and is crucial to preventing gender-based violence.¹⁰ Our national strategy on violence against women strongly

⁸ Well Woman Centre. (2020). [Contraceptive access and provision in Dublin: A report.](#)

⁹ Government of Ireland. (2023, October 16). [Minister for health announces that free contraception will be extended to women aged 32-35 from 1 July 2024.](#)

¹⁰DCU. (2022). [RSE and adopting a whole of school approach: International best practices that Irish schools can implement.](#)

recommends a reformed school curricula which can focus on issues like gender stereotypes, intimate partner abuse, and the harms of pornography.¹¹

In order to be as effective as possible, SPHE should be mandatory. It is critical that all schools are supported to deliver the SPHE cycles in full, that the curriculum is fully inclusive, and culturally sensitive, taking account of the particular needs of minority and marginalised groups. Teachers must also receive ongoing training, and a whole school approach developed (involving parents, students and the wider community) to embed the values of gender equality in the structures and ethos of the school.¹²

Key recommendations

- Provide all teachers with high quality training, resources and tools, including on gender stereotypes, gender equality, and the various forms of violence against women.
- Increase the number of graduate programmes in SPHE and provide Continuous Professional Development (CPD) support for teachers with previous SPHE training experiences
- Establish a framework for an evidence based continuous review and evaluation of the SPHE curricula which incorporates a gender lens, in addition to robust mechanism for students, parents and the wider community to provide feedback on the new curricula's implementation

3. Deliver Public Childcare

Deliver a new public system of accessible, affordable, high-quality childcare

Our current childcare system is broken. Ireland has the highest level of private provision of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) of any OECD country.¹³ Currently, ECEC costs for parents are among the highest in the EU¹⁴, consuming a significant portion of household income, leaving many families struggling to cover other competing outgoings such as mortgage/rent, bills and groceries. High costs of childcare across the country are particularly compounded in certain areas, as there is up to a 60% variation in service fees between the most and least expensive counties.¹⁵ A fully state-subsidised, profit-driven model, is not sustainable as a long-term vision for the sector and will never meet the needs of a changing society.

NWC, along with an alliance of over 30 organisations it has brought together, is calling for a public system of early years education and care. Countries with public systems have demonstrated greater affordability, accessibility, and quality in their services, with better pay, security and conditions for workers.¹⁶ A public system involves state responsibility and engagement in all aspects of ECEC, not just funding. It takes into public hands the tasks of design and planning, administration (including payment of educators' salaries), oversight and accountability through standard frameworks (like the current Aistear framework). It will also require expansion of the community sector and rollout of public-delivered ECEC services (starting with those areas underserved through a pilot programme) alongside private provision.

¹¹ Government of Ireland. (2022). [Third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Department of Justice.](#)

¹² National Women's Council of Ireland. (2023). [Summary report of a roundtable discussion on SPHE.](#)

¹³ Oireachtas Library & Research Service. (2020). *Public provision of early childhood education: An overview of the international evidence.*

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Pobal. (n.d.). [Childcare fees.](#)

¹⁶ Heery, E. (2020) *Public Provision of Early Childhood Education, an overview of the international evidence.*

Guarantee childcare for every child, in every community, across Ireland

Currently, many families are unable to access the childcare that they need due to the limited number of childcare spaces available (particularly for under 2s) because it is simply not cost effective for private providers to provide this care due to ratio levels. Rural and disadvantaged urban areas are also underserved by private providers where there it is less incentivised to operate. It is particularly difficult for parents of children with extra needs to access care. These challenges are further compounded for single-parent families (mainly led by women) and Traveller and Roma women, with low participation rates of these groups in Childcare/Early Years schemes reflecting the inaccessible nature of current options.¹⁷

Building a public ECEC system is about realising all young children's right to education and care, from birth, regardless of their background, their extra needs, or where in Ireland they live. The current market model leaves large numbers of children and families without access to ECEC. A public system will ensure that every child is guaranteed a quality, affordable place in early years education through legislation, similar to our primary school system. It will deliver childcare from the age that parents need it and will include school aged childcare. It will be accessible and available to all children, including children with additional needs, children living in rural areas and children in disadvantaged areas.

Ensure decent wages and working conditions for all educators

Staff recruitment and retention pose a critical challenge affecting service provision, sustainability and quality. High staff turnover is driven by low pay and poor conditions for the educators who work in the sector. While recent pay deals for educators has resulted in modest pay increases, recruitment and retention is still a big issue for the sector, and educators are still the lowest paid within the education sector. With the increase in the National Minimum Wage in Budget 2025 to €13.50/hour, this places wages only 15c below the Employment Regulation Order established in June 2024 for educators of €13.65/hour. The Living Wage (to be implemented in 2026) is higher again, at €14.80/hour.

In the latest Siptu – The Early Years union survey (2024) 30% of managers reported that “their service is at risk of closure due to the staffing crisis”.¹⁸ Europe, the biggest factor in lowering the pay and conditions of care workers is the extent to which care is marketised. Countries with public systems have demonstrated greater affordability, accessibility, and quality in their services, with better pay, security and conditions for workers.¹⁹ The introduction of a public system of ECEC would ensure decent pay and working conditions for early years educators that is commensurate with their professional training and experience.

Key recommendations

- Every child is guaranteed a quality, affordable place in early years education through legislation, similar to our primary school system
- Childcare is available from the age that parents need it and includes school aged childcare
- Provide flexibility and choice for parents, empowering all mothers and all parents to fully participate in all aspects of society, including work, education, public participation
- All children, irrespective of their background, any additional needs they may have or their location can benefit from quality early education and care
- Early years educators have decent pay and working conditions that is commensurate with their professional training and experience.
- It is not for profit. All investment is used to deliver the best outcomes for children.

¹⁷ Government of Ireland. (2023). [Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030](#).

¹⁸ SIPTU. (2024). [SIPTU survey report on workers' experiences](#).

¹⁹ Oireachtas Library & Research Service. (2020).

Extend paid maternity, paternity, other family leave, and enhance flexible working

Lack of accessible and affordable childcare is the single biggest barrier to women's participation in all areas of society, including the workplace, but also in education, the arts, sports and the political sphere. Women are still the main caregivers for children in Ireland. In 2022, 244,823 women listed themselves as looking after the family home in the Census, compared to 27,495 men. And 86% of lone parents in Ireland are women. We know from countries where a public system of early childhood education and care operates in tandem with paid systems of parental leave – so that there are no gaps in childcare – the impact for gender equality is significant. In contrast, in Ireland, it is women who end up making the difficult decisions – to leave work or to go part-time, to drop out of education, to curtail their passions in the arts or sports. This is reinforced by the gender pay gap, whereby in heterosexual couples, women often earn less than men. In turn, women's decisions to leave work or take part-time roles reinforces the gender pay gap.

Payments for family leave in Ireland are much lower than EU norms and there is a larger gap between the end of paid leave and the start of early years education services.²⁰ Payments in most OECD countries offer at least 50% of average earnings, with many offering 100%, while in Ireland less than a third of average earnings are replaced.²¹ 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. A new system of public childcare must be combined with better paid and longer maternity, paternity, and other family leave so that parents have real choices when it comes to caring for their child. Family leave must be flexible enough for lone parents, or other carers and guardians, to be able to avail of the full leave entitlement too. And we must ensure enhanced flexible working conditions to support parents work life balance.

Key recommendations

- Increase Maternity, Adoptive, Paternity and Parent's Benefit payments to an adequate benchmarked level, and examine the implementation of a percentage-of-earnings model of leave/benefit
- Convert existing unpaid Parental Leave to paid leave
- Ensure lone parents have access to the same leave entitlements as couples
- Progress and fully implement legislation to provide for deferral of maternity leave for new mothers/birthing parents during their care/treatment for serious illness

4. Deliver Care Services and Supports

Deliver universal rights-based social care that promotes individual autonomy & dignity

There is a crisis in care and support, with under-resourcing, lack of adequate provision, accessibility issues, and moves towards commodification and corporatisation affecting almost all aspects of care and support provision. This poses significant challenges for disabled people, older persons and their families in accessing care and supports, which appropriately meets their needs. Ongoing challenges are reflected in long waiting lists and geographical blackspots in the availability of home support; a lack of respite support; underinvestment in personal assistance supports; a continued over reliance on acute and residential care and a lack of alternative housing options for individuals to live independently and within the community.

²⁰ Oireachtas Library & Research Services (2021) [L&RS Bill Digest: Family Law Bill 2021](#).

²¹ OECD (2021) OECD Family Database: F2.1. [Parental Leave Systems](#).

The commodification of nursing and home care has led to expansion in presence of private, profit driven providers. Increasing public investment in and provision of public care and support services is a vital component of advancing gender inequality. In countries with public care systems, they demonstrate greater affordability, accessibility, and quality in their services, with better pay, security and conditions for workers. Investment in a public system rather than dependence on the market to provide services is crucial. Universal homes and community care and support services which appropriately meet the needs of disabled people and older persons are essential. Supports must be rights-based, person-centred and promote autonomy, independence and dignity of the individual.

Ensure access to person-centred home support for all who need it

Despite investment in home support in recent years, many older women are not getting the support that they need. There are almost 6,000 people on waiting lists for home support with geographical blackspots in communities across the country.²² Research²³ and recent reporting has shown significant challenges in accessing home support including long waiting times, red tape and lack of flexibility, task-focused care provision, a move away from domestic support, lack of recognition of psycho-social needs and variability between support services based on geographical location. The provision of high quality, person-centred home support is critical to ensuring that older people can live at home, in their own communities for as long as possible. More specifically and following the recent establishment of the Commission on Care on Older People, there is a real opportunity to bring a gender analysis to the development of health and social care services and consider the particular needs of older women.

The current Programme for Government includes a clear commitment to introduce a statutory scheme to support people to live in their own homes, which will provide equitable access to high quality regulated home care. Legislative issues relating to licencing and regulation of the sector must be addressed, in addition to ensuring a secure sustainable funding model for home care, a reformed model of service delivery, in addition to tackling issues relating to recruitment and retention of workers. The next Government must tackle the ongoing challenges and ensure delivery of a rights-based home support scheme, which takes account of the particular needs of women, ensuring quality of access and availability in every community.

Key recommendations

- Introduce licencing, registration²⁴ and regulation²⁵ of home support providers
- Fully establish the National Home Support Office
- Continue the roll out of interRAI, as the new standard assessment tool for care-needs in the community
- Implement in full the recommendations of the cross departmental Strategic Workforce Advisory Group to address workforce challenges

²² Oireachtas. (2024, June 27). [Dáil Éireann debate: Waiting lists and home support.](#)

²³ Donnelly, S., O'Brien, M., Begley, E. and Brennan, J. (2016) "I'd prefer to stay at home but I don't have a choice" Meeting Older People's Preference for Care: Policy, but what about practice? Dublin: University College Dublin.

²⁴ The General Scheme to establish a licensing framework for professional home support services delivered in the State - the Health (Amendment) (Licensing of Professional Home Support Providers) Bill 2024 General Scheme - was approved by Government on 14 May 2024. It was referred to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health for pre-legislative scrutiny and Department officials met with the Committee on 19 June 2024.

²⁵ This Bill will provide for the regulation of the sector by HIQA. Final amendments have been made to draft regulations for home support providers following a public consultation and engagement with stakeholder groups. The Department is working with HIQA, which has prepared draft quality standards that are expected to go out for public consultation Q3 2024.

- Deliver on sectoral reform such as payment for travel time for home support providers, paying carers the National Living Wage at a minimum, and bringing legacy rates in line with the new revised rates of funding
- Establish a new model of service delivery, which incorporates a gender dimension

Legislate for a statutory right to personal assistance

The Personal Assistance Service (PAS) is a valuable support in ensuring disabled people have autonomy over their own lives and can actively participate in all aspects of society. PAS is recognised nationally and internationally as a cost effective investment to promote inclusion. In the absence of a structured approach to personal assistance disabled people face barriers in accessing support and limited opportunities to participate in mainstream education, employment, political and community life. Disabled people are often forced to rely on family members which is known to have negative impacts on both the person and family member. ILMI has recommended the establishment of a PAS system that is fair, with clear definitions, and a social-model informed assessment of need which is invested in as a priority for the National Disability Services Action Plan.²⁶ Critically, all policy and legislative commitments must be truly reflective of the UNCRPD, which embodies an ethos of independent living and the rights of disabled people to live a life of self-determination.

Key recommendations

- Commit to the development of a national PAS service based on the principles of the ILMI PAS NOW campaign
- Commit to year-on-year increase in PAS hours
- Synchronise supports for disabled people to live independent lives from accessing education Standardise supports in school with PAS by renaming and restructuring SNAs to become PAS in the education system
- Ensure that DPOs are resourced to engage with families so that they become aware of and drive demand for PAS as a transformative enabler of the rights of disabled people and their families
- Ensure that personalised budgets become accessible and readily available for disabled people to manage their own resources to live independent lives

Provide supported housing options to enable independent living in communities

Housing for All provides a framework to increase and improve housing options for older people to facilitate ageing in place with dignity and independence. It builds on the Housing Options for Older People published jointly by the Department of Health and Housing in 2019. This statement provides policy options in support of range of housing alternatives/ choices that meet the diverse needs of an ageing population, spanning owner occupier, private rental and social housing, whilst providing accessible care and the associated support needs. Despite policy developments, Age Action's State of Ageing report 2022²⁷, examined experiences of older people's housing based on the UN Template for Housing Adequacy. At least 48% of older persons do not have adequate housing, as defined by the UN standard. Significant issues were identified including in relation to habitability, accessibility²⁸ and location (with almost 10% of persons aged 65 or older living in isolated rural areas with limited access to essential services).

²⁶ Independent Living Movement Ireland. (2024). [Invest in inclusion: A call to action for disability inclusion in Ireland.](#)

²⁷ Age Action. (2022). [Reframing ageing: State of ageing in Ireland 2022.](#)

²⁸ The largest issue is that half of older persons' homes have a Building Energy Rating of E, F or G. The second largest inadequacy is lack of accessibility or adaptation to the needs of older persons with disabilities or mobility impairments, which affects up to 10% of households.

Recent developments, including the launch of the Healthy Age Friendly Homes Programme across all 31 local authorities in July 2024 is welcome. However, this must be aligned with clear commitments to ensure access to adequate housing and investment in a range of health and social care services (including home support) to enable independent living in communities for our older population. Critically, the housing needs of older women must be addressed within national social housing policy, recognising the particular challenges that this cohort face. Of critical importance is also ensuring that the voice of the older women is at the centre of decision making on housing and their choice in where and who they wish to live with must take priority.

Key recommendations

- Resource Local Authority Housing Delivery Action Plans which include proposed delivery of housing for older people. Such plans should also take account of the particular needs of older women
- Invest in and deliver innovative forms of housing options through enhanced design, construction and grant programmes to facilitate universal, ageing in place and rightsizing options
- Gender proof/impact assess implementation of housing policy and actions to address the particular needs of older women

5. Eliminate Poverty

Increase and benchmark social protection rates to ensure adequate income for all

Our 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 and access to state support.²⁹ 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.³⁰ The gendered structural inequalities in our labour and social protection systems are compounded further by the cost-of-living crisis, which continue to impact women disproportionately hard.

Since January 2020, inflation has risen by over 20% – costs now are one-fifth higher than they were before the pandemic.³¹ Yet increases in social protection rates have not kept pace. Recent budgets have relied on once-off expenditure to get people through the cost-of-living crisis – however, 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. Payment increases have not been sufficient to offset increases in cost of living and are still going up. We need a social protection system that can support all women to achieve a minimum essential standard of living, now and into the future.

Key recommendations

- Establish the Minimum Essential Standard of Living as the benchmark for social protection payments by 2026 to ensure an adequate income for all
- Reform social protection payments to better support the most marginalised groups in society, including through the adjustment of income disregards, and eligibility thresholds

²⁹ National Economic and Social Council (2022) *Ireland's Social Welfare System: Gender, Family and Class*.

³⁰ Doorley, K. at al (2018) *The Gender impact of Irish budgetary policy 2008-2018*.

³¹ RTÉ News. (2024, October 11). *Inflation rate*. <https://www.rte.ie/news/economy-at-a-glance/2012/0327/315205-inflation/>

Reform the social protection system to treat women as individuals, not dependents

Our social protection system continues to be rooted in a ‘male breadwinner’ approach to paid and unpaid work. This is evidenced by the ‘qualified adult’ system – where payments to two-parent families comprise a payment for the main claimant and a Qualified Adult (QA) payment to additional adults in the household. The available data shows that 90% of QAs are women.³² This system creates a relationship of dependency, as QAs do not receive an income in their own right and are excluded from many active labour market programmes that require a core social protection payment.

The Roadmap for Social Inclusion has a commitment to examine individualisation, and the Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality also recommended it. The Covid-19 income supports have demonstrated that it is possible to administer payments in an individualised way. We now have an opportunity to abolish the system of dependency and implement an individualised approach, based on equality with individual entitlements for all women.

Key recommendations

- Adopt a fully individualised social protection system so that women are treated as individuals, rather than dependents of their partners
- Ensure Qualified Adults can access a range of active labour market programmes
- Resource a national survey to ascertain skills, education, health, care/support and employment experience of Qualified Adults to address data gaps

Introduce a Universal State Pension to guarantee a decent income for older women

As women are more likely to be in low paid, part-time jobs on precarious contracts, and are more likely to take time out of paid employment because of caring and supporting responsibilities, it makes it difficult to collect sufficient PRSI contributions. In effect women are less likely to be eligible for the full State Pension (Contributory). They are less likely to be covered by occupational or private pension schemes, and more reliant upon the means-tested State Pension (Non-Contributory).³³ Older women have also faced structural barriers like the Marriage Bar and exclusion from new schemes to recognise care and support – and these issues should be rectified through a retrospective scheme. Moving to a Universal State Pension, guaranteeing adequate income for all at pension age, is the best way to support women and those who encounter barriers to the labour market, including disabled people, carers and supporters, lone parents, Travellers and Roma.

Key recommendations

- Deliver a Universal State Pension system for all
- Benchmark State Pension to 34% of average earnings to maintain the relative value of the State pension compared to earnings growth and price inflation
- In the interim, the State should provide for retrospective contributions, including for those caring more than 20 years to ensure a full State Pension (Contributory); to allow access for women born before 01/09/1946 to the Homemaker’s and Home Caring Periods schemes; and a once-off, ring-fenced retrospective scheme in acknowledgement of the injustices of the marriage bar

³² NESC (2021) Background Paper 151/4, 2021 – Ireland’s Social Welfare System: Gender, Family and Class.

³³ National Women’s Council of Ireland (2021) [Submission to the Commission on Pensions](#).

Close the gender pay gap, implement a living wage, legislate for collective bargaining rights

The current employment system does not properly recognise and value care responsibilities, which alienates many women from the labour market and limits their participation at varying levels. Lone parents, migrants and ethnic minority women, Traveller and Roma women, disabled women and young women already all experience heightened barriers to labour market participation. It is imperative that the State create the conditions in which women can access decent, secure work that is also compatible with care responsibilities. This includes enhanced flexible working and family leave entitlements. Action must also be taken to improve pay, conditions and collective bargaining across the labour market, particularly in sectors with a high level of female employment.

For many women paid work is no guarantee of income adequacy as women predominate in sectors characterised by low paid and precarious work. 6 out of 10 low paid workers are women³⁴ and the gender pay gap remains at almost 10%,³⁵ with this rate increasing to as high as 50% in some sectors. This has serious implications for a woman's lifetime earnings, her life and career decisions, and her ability to live in older years with a decent income. The Irish Government must support women to access decent work opportunities, and all labour activation policies must be gender and equality-proofed.

Key recommendations

- Legislate for and enhance collective bargaining across the labour market, particularly in industries with a high level of female employment, in order to raise wages and improve working conditions³⁶
- Expand the Gender Pay Gap Information Act 2021 to include organisations with more than 25 employees and set up a centralised database of this information
- Pursue active policies that enhance pay and conditions for women in paid employment, in particular across the care and community sectors (where women are disproportionately represented, and work is often insecure and low paid)

6. Provide Housing and Accommodation

Invest in state-led housing for social, affordable, cost-rental homes and Gender proof all housing policies, budgets and services

The housing, homelessness and accommodation crisis continues to have a devastating impact on women and families. Ireland has one of the highest rates of female homelessness in the EU21³⁷ even while many 'hidden homeless' people are excluded from official statistics (including women in refuges and Traveller

³⁴ 6 out of 10 low paid workers are women with young people and lone parents more likely to be low paid or National Minimum Wage (NMW) workers. According to the CSO, in 2021 median weekly earnings for males were €711.87 compared with €570.22 for females, a differential of 19%. Furthermore, almost half of women earn less than €20,000 a year.

³⁵ Central Statistics Office. (2023). [Gender pay gap from the Structure of Earnings Survey 2022](#). Government of Ireland.

³⁶ In 2024 the Irish government will transpose the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages. This directive requires Ireland to implement a national action plan on collective bargaining coverage. Currently, collective bargaining coverage is relatively low in the Irish labour market compared to other EU countries. It is critical for women that the State takes the appropriate measures through the transposition of this Directive to enhance collective bargaining rights. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission's in its July 2023 policy statement on care recommends that the State take immediate action to address the ongoing absence of a statutory right to collective bargaining, and adopt measures to increase trade union membership across the care sector. It is of fundamental importance that the Irish Government enhance collective bargaining across the labour market, particularly in industries with a high level of female employment, in order to raise wages and improve working conditions.

³⁷ Bretheron, J., & Mayock, P. (2021). [Women's homelessness: European evidence review](#). FEANTSA.

and Roma families forced to live on roadsides).³⁸ Marginalised groups of women face additional barriers to housing, as outlined below.

The recent publication of the Housing Commission's Report has laid out starkly the accommodation deficit that faces our society – up to a quarter of a million homes.³⁹ Ireland's housing strategy remains over-reliant on the private sector to build homes and to provide housing through the private rented sector. The state must dramatically increase in its own direct provision of housing, focusing on the provision of social, affordable and cost-rental homes.

Key recommendations

- Increase investment/supply in state led housing to address the current housing deficit
- Increase housing provision towards an ownership target of at least 20% of total housing by Approved Housing Bodies and Local Authorities
- Implement the recommendations of the Housing Commission report 2024
- Develop housing policy, budgets and provision which is gender-proofed and delivers secure, affordable accommodation for all women and girls

Strengthen tenant's rights

Historically in Ireland, relatively weak regulation protecting tenants and a power imbalance between their rights and those of landlords, combined with short term leases has led to a widespread view of private rental as the most precarious of tenures, with certain groups in society being disproportionately vulnerable to housing precarity.⁴⁰ The current housing crisis, with a lack of housing units, combined with spiralling rent, places tenants at even greater risk of power disparities. One of the most harmful and gendered forms of exploitation is the placing of advertisements by prospective landlords offering discounted or free accommodation in return for sex.

This practice appears to primarily occur when renters are seeking to rent a room from a landlord under a license agreement as opposed to a self-contained dwelling which would be covered by the Residential Tenancies Act (RTA).⁴¹ Marginalised and structurally vulnerable women are amongst those most harmed by sex-for-rent exploitation including those without alternative housing options due to poverty, disability, insecure immigration status, domestic or family violence, debt, a lack of family support or unstable/poorly paid employment.⁴² Ensuring women in private rental accommodation are protected from exploitation, are able to live in secure and affordable housing of an adequate standard, and that further numbers entering homelessness are stopped, can only happen if the state takes a more active role in ensuring and strengthening the rights of tenants in both state and private rental accommodation.

Key recommendations

- Introduce a rent freeze and a new system of rent controls, while banning evictions to reduce numbers entering homelessness
- Broaden and strengthen the remit of the Residential Tenancies Board (including to cover issues of sexual harassment within rental housing)
- Increase spending on tenant protections and private rent inspections
- Legislate to bring licensee arrangements under the Residential Tenancy Act
- Legislate to make the proposing of sex for rent arrangements a specific named offence

³⁸ Cork and Kerry RTAWG (2022) [Traveller Homelessness \(A Hidden Crisis\)](#).

³⁹ Housing Commission. (2023). [Report of the Housing Commission](#). Government of Ireland.

⁴⁰ Waldron, R., 2023a. [Experiencing housing precarity in the private rental sector during the covid-19 pandemic: the case of Ireland](#). *Housing Studies*, [online] 38(1).

⁴¹ National Women's Council of Ireland. (2023). [Sex for rent: Research report](#).

⁴² Ibid.

Deliver targeted housing supports for marginalised groups of women

Traveller and Roma women, disabled women, migrant women, older women, victim-survivors of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, and lone parents all face significant barriers to accessing secure, affordable and safe housing. Domestic abuse is a leading cause of homelessness for women and children.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ Older women are more likely to be living alone than men and are more likely to live in low-quality housing.⁴⁵ Migrant women face a range of barriers, with migrant women from outside the EU more likely to live in overcrowded housing and experience homelessness.⁴⁶ NWC is calling on the next Government to ensure access to secure long term housing for marginalised women through targeted measures and supports.

Key recommendations

- Traveller and Roma women: full resourcing of the forthcoming National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, including actions related to accommodation
- Disabled women: full resourcing of National Housing Strategy for Disabled People Implementation Plan and sufficient funding for all areas of disability housing policy
- Older women: increase investment in housing supports for older people, including a range of housing aid grants and home support grants
- Victim-survivors of DSGBV: Resource an integrated gender-sensitive emergency accommodation response for victim-survivors fleeing violence, including the provision of more refuge units, especially in counties with none available
- Women leaving prison: invest in measures to support the community reintegration of women leaving the criminal justice system and to counter recidivism, particularly those assessed to be low-risk to society, including step-down community-based facilities with supported accommodation and other support services
- Lone parents: reconvene the Family Homeless Prevention sub-group as part of the National Homeless Action Committee and develop a family homelessness action plan

7. End Violence against Women

Allocate increased multi-annual funding to frontline services, advocacy and research

Despite policy and legislative progress, violence against women is at epidemic levels. In 2023, Women's Aid⁴⁷ saw the highest disclosures of domestic violence ever recorded by the organisation in 50 years. In the same year, the Gardaí received a domestic abuse call every 10 minutes⁴⁸ and according to the Sexual Violence Survey published by the Central Statistics Office⁴⁹ in 2023, 52% of women will experience sexual violence in their lifetime.⁵⁰

⁴³ Mercy Law Resource Centre. (2023). [Social housing, domestic violence, and the public sector duty: The legal and policy context.](#)

⁴⁴ Safe Ireland (2021) [Women's Domestic Abuse Refuges: Submission to Oireachtas Justice Committee.](#)

⁴⁵ Age Action (2023) [Spotlight on Income in Older Age.](#)

⁴⁶ ESRI (2022) [The integration of non-EU migrant women in Ireland.](#)

⁴⁷ Women's Aid. (2024). [Annual impact report 2023.](#)

⁴⁸ McDonagh, D. (2024, February 9). [Gardaí received a domestic abuse call every 10 minutes last year.](#) *Irish Mirror.*

⁴⁹ Central Statistics Office (2023) Sexual Violence Survey - Disclosure of Experiences Key Findings

⁵⁰ Central Statistics Office. (2023). [Sexual violence survey: Disclosure of experiences key findings.](#) Government of Ireland.

The publication of the Zero Tolerance Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence⁵¹ in 2022 was welcomed by the National Women’s Council, and crucially its commitment to establish an integrated all-of-government national response through the creation of a new statutory agency, Cuan, established in January 2024. Specialist services are providing vital supports for survivors, which are key to the implementation of the Zero Tolerance Strategy. However, they have reported serious concerns regarding the uncertain and short-term nature of funds allocated to combat DSGBV⁵². Given that organisations provide 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. Specialised support organisations and civil society must be adequately resourced through Cuan to meet the increasing demand of services.

Key recommendations

- Allocate secure, multi-annual funding to Cuan, to deliver its own functions but also critically to administer the required resources to vital frontline services, research and advocacy
- Ensure stronger collaboration across the relevant government departments and bodies to address existing gaps in implementation of the TNS, and facilitate strong co-design and collaboration with civil society organisations to implement the Strategy
- Commitments under the Strategy by all responsible Departments need to be costed and made transparent so that the Strategy can be realised in full
- Ensure a truth-telling process, and proper accountability and full redress to all survivors of institutional abuse.

Embed a survivor-centred approach across the justice system

In 2023, NWC, in partnership with the Department of Justice published Research on the Intersection of the Criminal Justice, Private Family Law and Public Law Childcare Processes in Relation to Domestic and Sexual Violence⁵³, as part of the actions planned in the implementation of the Zero Tolerance Strategy. This report provides key findings on how victim-survivors’ survivors experiences are not being sufficiently considered in the justice system. This research also highlights the victim’s experience in the court process, which in many cases causes secondary traumatisation. In addition, the Study on Familicide & Domestic and Family Violence Death Reviews⁵⁴ noted that there are high attrition rates in domestic violence cases, related to the lack of progress on completion of criminal cases. High attrition rates for survivors of DSGBV and court delays remain a big concern. These challenges must be addressed in order to put the needs and voices of survivors at the centre of the justice system.

Key recommendations

- Enhance collaborative practices across the three legal processes processes/courts regarding domestic and sexual violence (Criminal Justice, Family Law and Child Care Processes)
- Resource court and non-court support for victims-survivors reporting domestic and sexual abuse, including free legal advice, training programmes for those coming into contact with victims-survivors and physical court environments
- Review and reform the in-camera rule to ensure transparency and consistency in decision-making (ensuring women’s safety, privacy and anonymity)
- Address the experiences encountered by victims that have a cross-sector attritional effect

⁵¹ Department of Justice (2022).

⁵² Irish Observatory on Violence Against Women. (2023). [Monitoring report on Zero Tolerance: Implementation of the national strategy to combat domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence.](#)

⁵³ National Women’s Council & Department of Justice. (2023). [Report on the intersection of the criminal justice, private family law, and public law childcare processes in relation to domestic and sexual violence.](#)

⁵⁴ Government of Ireland. (2023). *Study on familicide: Domestic and family violence death reviews.* <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/823ba-study-on-familicide-domestic-and-family-violence-death-reviews/>

- Increase the number of judges, in line with the OECD and the Judicial Planning Working Group report to address one of the main causes of the court system delays and its attritional effect on victims-survivors

Deliver more refuge units and secure long-term housing for all victims-survivors

Domestic abuse is a leading cause of homelessness for women and children in Ireland.⁵⁵ Despite the commitment in the Third National Strategy to double the number of refuge units to 280 nationally⁵⁶, this will still fall far short of Council of Europe guidelines. As of June 2024, there were still nine counties in Ireland without any refuge provision.⁵⁷ Domestic violence refuge spaces must be increased significantly in line with Council of Europe guidelines.⁵⁸ Additionally, all refuges must be resourced and able to respond appropriately to the intersecting needs of all women and children, including Traveller women, disabled women, migrant women and women exiting prostitution and sex-trafficking.

Moreover, there is an immediate need for a national plan to respond to the integral relationship between domestic abuse and homelessness of women and children, which should focus on improving access to safe and stable housing across all housing types (social, private rented and private ownership). Structurally vulnerable victims of DSGBV, such as migrants, ethnic minority groups, members of the LGBTQI+ community and disabled people can face multiple barriers to securing adequate housing when fleeing domestic violence. There are further problems for victim/survivors in accessing suitable long-term housing. The primary and universal barrier for all caught up in the housing crisis is the lack of availability of social housing.

Key recommendations

- Increase domestic violence refuge spaces to the recommended 500 spaces (1 per 10,000), in line with Council of Europe guidelines and to ensure provision in every community across the country
- Deliver access to secure, long term housing for all victims/survivors of DSGBV through targeted measures and supports
- Reform the Habitual Residence Condition test to ensure that victims-survivors of DSGBV can access housing supports and social protections promptly

Ensure a truth-telling process, and proper accountability and full redress to all survivors of institutional abuse

As reported by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the State has repeatedly failed to ensure rights-based, independent, survivor-centred, thorough and effective investigations, into allegations of past human rights violations against women and girls.⁵⁹ Such historical abuses include the Magdalene Laundries, mother and baby homes, child abuse in schools, foster care and other settings,⁶⁰ and the practice of symphysiotomy. The Commission has clearly identified that these abuses of women's rights must be fully investigated by the State in line with international human rights standards.

⁵⁵ Mercy Law Resource Centre. (2023).

⁵⁶ Government of Ireland. (2022).

⁵⁷ Holland, K. (2024, June 18). [Nine counties have no refuge for women, children suffering domestic violence – SF leader.](#) *The Irish Times*.

⁵⁸ Council of Europe. (2023). [Protecting women from violence: Shelter services.](#)

⁵⁹ Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. (2022). [Ireland and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.](#)

⁶⁰ IHREC, [Ireland and the Rights of the Child](#) (2022), p. 42.

The implementation of redress schemes has been marked by inadequacies and limitations, creating barriers for women seeking equal access to effective redress.⁶¹ Most recently, the Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme Act 2023 has been designed to minimise financial liability and significantly narrow the eligibility for compensation, including by excluding those who stayed in an institution for less than six months from eligibility for free health services. This reflects a broader governmental approach, which makes successive schemes progressively more limited,⁶² and less effective in vindicating the rights of women.

Key recommendations

- Establish timely, independent, transparent, thorough, intersectional, and effective survivor-centred investigations for victims/survivors
- Deliver redress schemes which enable victims and survivors to access an effective remedy based on the right to truth, justice, reparation, non-recurrence and memory processes and in line with human rights principles.
- Ensure that the national scheme for compensation of victims-survivors of domestic and sexual abuse fulfils the State's EU and international legal obligations and is accessible to, and appropriately accommodates the particular experiences and needs of victims-survivors of domestic and sexual abuse

Support initiatives to tackle misogyny and online hate and violence against women

One of the key pillars of the Zero Tolerance Strategy is prevention – seeking the eradication of the social and cultural norms that underpin and contribute to gender-based violence. The Zero Tolerance Strategy is excellent in its ambition and it recognises that it is only through a society wide effort that we will achieve real change. However, without the proper resourcing and implementation, it cannot be effective. A report of the National Observatory on violence against women and girls published at the end of 2023⁶³ highlighted major gaps and progress in the Strategy's implementation. This included significant challenges in implementation of the pillar on prevention including in tackling the negative influence of pornography, absence of awareness campaigns targeting specific marginalised communities as well as all forms of violence against women, challenges with implementation of the new SPHE curriculum (which has the potential to address issues of gender, gender stereotypes and gender based violence), ensuring online safety for women and girls, and a lack of appropriate training among professionals to best support survivors of DSGBV.

Critically, the Zero Tolerance Strategy and the new DSGBV agency Cuan, must be fully funded to realise the vision of the strategy in full, so that we can take concrete steps to eliminating violence against women in all its forms. This requires including survivor perspectives in the prevention of violence; and

⁶¹ The State has established a range of redress schemes to address historical abuse including the Residential Institutions Redress Scheme, the Magdalene Restorative Justice Scheme, the O'Keeffe Scheme and the Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme. Shortcomings identified in the operation of these redress schemes include an adversarial approach to the provision of redress; an unduly restrictive and narrow approach to the category of 'victim'; a short timeframe to apply to the scheme; overly burdensome standards of proof; low levels of award in comparison to violations suffered; difficulties accessing personal records held in archives; over reliance on the records of religious congregations in making assessments for eligibility; ambiguity about the weight being afforded to the testimony of individuals and/or their relatives; the ex gratia nature of the scheme meaning there is no acknowledgement of the violation of rights; and a requirement to sign a waiver against further legal recourse against state and non-state actors through the judicial process. IHREC, [Submission to the UN Committee against Torture on the List of Issues for the Third Examination of Ireland](#) (2020), pp. 26, 29–30. See also IHREC, [New Redress Scheme for Victims of Historic Schools Abuses Continues to Fail Victims](#) (2021).

⁶² Winter's analysis of three statutory redress schemes notes that designers of more recent schemes were instructed to avoid budgetary overruns as those encountered by the Residential Institutions Redress Board, for example by placing a cap on funding. Stephen Winter, [Monetary Redress for Abuse in State Care](#) (2022), pp. 45-116.

⁶³ Irish Observatory on Violence Against Women (2023).

the need for robust measurement and data to monitor the Strategy effectively and hold government and statutory bodies to account.

Key recommendations

- Fully resource (including through frontline services) and monitor the prevention pillar of the TNS through robust monitoring and data collection mechanisms
- Counter and prevent misogynistic hate crime through the introduction of new hate crime and incitement to violence legislation, complemented with the introduction of a dedicated Action Plan Against Hate to address hate crime and hate speech against women, including women from minority and marginalised groups
- Address and combat the increasing phenomenon of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) in all its guises, particularly in relation to child and intimate image abuse, and take steps to create a safer and more secure digital environment for women and girls and hold perpetrators of TFGBV and the private sector to account

8. Advance Women's Leadership and Participation

Legislate for Gender Quotas in Local Elections

Despite being over half of Ireland's population, women remain underrepresented in Irish politics, particularly at the local level, where only 26% of councillors are women.⁶⁴ Women face additional barriers to entering and retaining a career in local politics. Gender quotas have proven effective at the national level and should be implemented locally to address this imbalance. Research shows that policy outcomes improve when women are adequately represented.⁶⁵ It is crucial to take meaningful action to introduce legislative gender quotas in local elections, to amplify women's voices and ensure equitable representation in local government.

Mandate 40% Quota for Women on Corporate Boards

NWC supports the Private Members' Bill on Board Gender Quotas. The NWC's 'Balance the Odds' campaign initiated in 2022, is essential for advancing women's equality by increasing their representation on corporate boards. The proposed Private Members' Bill mandates a 33% quota for women on boards, increasing to 40% after three years, with potential sanctions for companies that fail to meet these requirements. In November 2022, the EU approved the "Women on Boards" Directive, requiring that by 2026, at least 40% of the underrepresented gender must be represented on non-executive boards of listed companies, or 33% across all directors. This legislation has real potential to improve women's representation on boards and subsequent leadership in the corporate world.

Boost women's Representation in STEM

Recent research shows that women occupy just 25% of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) jobs in Ireland.⁶⁶ Male students are twice as likely to be encouraged to pursue tech studies compared to their female peers.⁶⁷ Addressing this imbalance is crucial, as women's unique insights can drive more innovative solutions in STEM fields and ensure that gender-specific issues are properly

⁶⁴ O'Connor, J. (2023, October 16). [This political battle will play out in the shadows. Irish Examiner.](#)

⁶⁵ Müller, M. H., & Riedel, M. (2020). [The interplay of social and financial capital in the life course of low-income families: A qualitative study.](#) *Social Science Research*, 88, 102421.

⁶⁶ O'Reilly, A. (2024, June 28). [Women in STEM: Addressing imbalance is imperative for innovation. The Irish Times.](#)

⁶⁷ Ibid.

addressed. The next government must invest and support learning environments that encourage participation from all students, addressing any unconscious biases or stereotypes that may discourage girls from pursuing STEM.

Put women at the heart of peace building and reconciliation

Conflicts often disproportionately affect women, through sexual violence, displacement, and loss of livelihoods. It is crucial that we intensify our efforts in peacebuilding and reconciliation throughout the island. Women often play key roles in their communities and can facilitate reconciliation and trust-building, which are critical for sustaining peace. The NWC “All-Island Women’s Forum” aims to address underrepresentation of women and further develop women’s role in peacebuilding and civic society, ensuring reconciliation remains central to our future. We call the government to continue funding organisations to strengthen connections North and South.

Key recommendations

- Reform remuneration for Councillors by allowing childcare/care and support costs as an expenditure category for Councillors
- Introduce maternity leave provision for members of the Oireachtas
- Increase funding for development of local and regional Women’s Caucuses
- Invest and support learning environments that encourage participation of women and girls in STEM (and other sectors which are typically underrepresented by women), addressing gender specific barriers to access and retention

9. Put People and Planet First

Develop Climate solutions that Empower Women and Marginalised Communities

The climate crisis will impact us all, but not equally. The concept of climate justice recognises that those who are already marginalised or disadvantaged will bear the worst of the impacts of the climate crisis, and climate change will compound existing inequalities in our society.⁶⁸ This includes women and girls in all of their diversity, and risks worsening existing gender inequality. Climate policy which does not pay attention to these uneven impacts will further compound those inequalities – many people cannot afford to purchase an electric vehicle or retrofit their home in the middle of the cost-of-living crisis, particularly women. Irish climate policy must be gender, equality and poverty-proofed to ensure that existing inequalities in our society are reduced, not exacerbated, as we make our green transition.

Key recommendations

- Reform remuneration for Councillors by allowing childcare/care and support costs as an expenditure category for Councillors
- Introduce maternity leave provision for members of the Oireachtas
- Increase funding for development of local and regional Women’s Caucuses
- Invest and support learning environments that encourage participation of women and girls in STEM (and other sectors which are typically underrepresented by women), addressing gender specific barriers to access and retention

⁶⁸ Dukelow, F., Forde, C. and Busteed, E. (2024) [Feminist Climate Justice Report](#).

Recognise Care Work as Essential to a Green Future

Care work is essential work and is also green work, being 26 times greener than manufacturing jobs and requiring no extraction of resources from the Earth. Despite this, care work continues to be poorly paid and gendered work, carried out largely by women and marginalised communities such as migrants. It is also absent in Irish climate policy, despite the EPA noting that investment in care would make Ireland more resilient to climate impacts. Care services and employment when properly resourced, funded and valued could fulfil the triple roles of improving employment and gender equality and helping us meet climate change targets. Care work should be recognised as the green work that it is, including wages and working conditions that value its essential role in our present and future society appropriately.

Key recommendations

- Reform macro-economic state policy frameworks, for example, the National Development Plan for greater focus to encourage and invest in economic diversification towards non emissions-intensive activities, including social infrastructure such as care and support

Retrofit for Resilience Prioritising Communities facing Energy Poverty

One in three households in Ireland are classified as living in energy poverty⁶⁹, and those most impacted by energy poverty are female lone parents renting private accommodation⁷⁰. Women are at greater risk of energy poverty due to their lower average incomes, and lone parents, older women living alone, disabled people and carers are particularly at risk. Travellers, who spend five to six times the national average on energy⁷¹, are not eligible for retrofitting schemes if they live in a caravan, mobile home or trailer. The cost of fossil fuel energy is both expensive and bad for our environment.

Cost is still a barrier to retrofitting, with one in three households finding the process too expensive⁷². Fully funded SEAI retrofits are plagued by waiting lists, with figures in 2024 showing an eight to ten month waiting period for home assessment alone⁷³ – this does not include the time required to carry out works on the house. More investment is needed in retrofitting to make it more immediate and accessible for those who need it most.

Key recommendations

- Target and increase investment in retrofitting schemes and measures, prioritising marginalised groups and those affected by energy poverty including women; disabled people; migrants; people seeking refuge and international protection; Travellers and Roma; and lone parents
- Develop a measurement for energy poverty that is not solely expenditure-based, and move beyond the household as the sole unit of measurement for energy poverty
- Adopt targeted measures to ensure Travellers and Roma living in all types of accommodation can avail of energy upgrades and SEAI grants
- Develop a scheme similar to the Building Energy Rating Certificate (BER) for trailers, caravans and mobile homes
- Develop research capacity to analyse the gendered effects of energy poverty
- Expand and increase of Fuel Allowance (see Social Protection section)

Make Public Transport Safe, Accessible, and Frequent for Everyone

⁶⁹ ESRI (2022) [Energy Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland](#).

⁷⁰ Dukelow, F., Forde, C. and Busteed, E. (2024).

⁷¹ Feminist Climate Justice Report, pg. 68

⁷² [Savills Ireland | One in three homeowners cannot afford to make their properties more energy-efficient](#)

⁷³ [Departmental Schemes – Tuesday, 14 May 2024 – Parliamentary Questions \(33rd Dáil\) – Houses of the Oireachtas](#)

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 – where everyone feels comfortable and safe going to and from work, schools, college, creches, shops and leisure. Safety concerns can stop women and marginalised communities, including LGBTQI+ people and people of colour from using public transport – 55% of women have said that they would not use public transport at night.⁷⁴

More public transport is necessary, especially for rural Ireland, but we cannot reproduce infrastructure which is inaccessible for disabled people and incompatible with caring journeys. We must pursue an expansive and reliable public transport system which is accessible for people in all their diversity and all kinds of journeys. This would alleviate the cost of car ownership for lower income households and help reduce our carbon emissions.

Key recommendations

- Prioritise and increase investment in public and active travel infrastructure, focusing on rural transport and making transport safer and more accessible
- Reduce the cost of public transport for people who struggle to access it:
 - Introduce a new integrated transport scheme for disabled people that meets the needs of the individual, and ensure all new transport spending incorporates the needs of disabled people
 - Expansion of the Free Travel Scheme
 - Continue extending the Young Adult Travel Card in Budget 2025, and implement zero cost travel for children and teenagers
 - Keep the School Transport Scheme free for the 2024/2025 academic year

10. Create an Ireland for All

Resource and strengthen women’s organisations across communities to promote inclusivity, solidarity and diversity

The women’s sector in Ireland has been the key driver in highlighting and addressing issues of isolation, economic dependency, poverty, violence, and powerlessness among women in all their diversity. However, ongoing underinvestment in the community development sector and local women’s organisations has exacerbated social exclusion across the island. Jobs in the community sector, predominantly held by women, continue to be insecure and low paid. This has enormously impacted the capacity of women’s groups for collective action, political analysis and for grassroots community development to address persistent inequalities in local communities and support women’s representation, participation and inclusion. Funding for women’s community organisations, and for community funding programmes like SICAP, remains well below 2008 levels – even before cost increases since then.^{75,76}

Women in rural communities experience additional barriers to participation, due to underinvestment in social infrastructure.⁷⁷ The community sector is particularly important in fostering inclusion and celebrating diversity within communities right across the island. With the growth of violence and hate in recent months directed at marginalised groups such as migrants and international protection applicants in particular, the community sector is more essential than ever in building inclusive communities that

⁷⁴ Transport Infrastructure Ireland (2020) [Travelling in a Woman’s Shoes](#).

⁷⁵ The Wheel (2023) [Family Resource Centre National Forum call for 3.34 million in core funding](#).

⁷⁶ Irish Local Development Work (2023) [Budget 2023: Protecting Communities & Promoting Social Inclusion](#).

⁷⁷ National Women’s Council (2021) [Paper on Women in Rural Communities](#).

welcome and support everyone. The community sector cannot effectively do this work without adequate funding.

Key recommendations/indicators

- Increase funding, including multi-annual state funding, to properly resource women's community organisations, and the broader community sector
- Ensure funding for services and programmes provides meaningful employment with decent terms and conditions for workers, including:
 - Pay scales commensurate and in alignment with public sector peers
 - Pension provision, paid sick leave, and paid maternity leave

Fully realise the UNCRPD to ensure active equal participation of all disabled people solidarity

In Ireland, 22% of the population has a disability,⁷⁸ yet significant barriers persist in accessing necessary services and supports, particularly for disabled women who face compounded challenges due to gender inequality. Despite Ireland ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018, progress in addressing these barriers has been slow. Recent statistics highlight the stark realities, such as only 34% of disabled people being in employment⁷⁹, and those unable to work due to long-standing illness experiencing the highest levels of poverty and deprivation.

The government's now-defunct Green Paper on social protection Disability Reform, while encouraging discussion, lacked engagement with disabled persons' organizations (DPOs) and civil society and did not fully address Ireland's obligations under the UNCRPD. This siloed approach, focusing primarily on social protection and narrowly on labour activation for disabled people was hugely problematic – it is imperative that the next National Disability Strategy considers the barriers faced by disabled people in its broadest sense.

The next National Disability Strategy must address the systemic issues that hinder disabled women's participation in society. A whole-of-government approach is needed, one that is underpinned by meaningful engagement with DPOs, and civil society and integrates cross-departmental efforts to remove barriers in various sectors, such as employment, housing, healthcare, and education. Only through co-creation and the embedding of UNCRPD obligations into policy reform can Ireland make meaningful progress in advancing the rights of disabled people.

Progress legislation and policies to tackle discrimination, hate and racism

NWC has witnessed an alarming rise in aggression and racist attitudes in recent years, fuelled by far-right actors and the spread of disinformation. Reports from the Institute of Strategic Dialogue⁸⁰ and the EU highlight the growing influence of the far right on social media in Ireland. A small core of ideologically committed actors consistently incites hatred, spreading fear and division, as evidenced by the work of the Hope and Courage Collective. They have documented increased violent rhetoric, both online and offline, targeting minority communities, including asylum seekers, migrants, LGBTQI+ individuals, and others. This rise in hostility is leading to greater division within communities, not only in Ireland but across the EU.

It is critical to differentiate between legitimate protest—a fundamental right in any democracy—and actions deliberately designed to incite hatred and fuel division. Acts of incitement to hatred, such as

⁷⁸ Central Statistics Office. (2023, August 31). [Press statement: Census 2022 results - Profile 4, disability, health and carers.](#)

⁷⁹ Central Statistics Office. (2023). [Census 2022 profile 4: Disability, health and carers - Disability and everyday living.](#)

⁸⁰ Institute for Strategic Dialogue. (2023). [Uisce faoi thalamh: Summary report.](#)

attacks on libraries, bookshops, and individuals from minority communities, must not be tolerated. We know that safety is built in communities where all people, regardless of background, have access to decent work, secure housing, good schools, and healthcare. Addressing challenges through social supports, skilled youth and community workers, rather than through fear and scapegoating, is essential. Both the government and social media companies have a role to play in stemming this rise in hatred by expediting hate crime and hate speech laws and enforcing standards online.

Key recommendations/indicators

- Expedite overdue hate crime and hate speech laws (ensuring the inclusion of incitement to hatred)
- Enhance and enforce standards online

Develop all-island strategies to advance women's rights and gender equality

Women have contributed enormously to peacebuilding, reconciliation and all island development. Through community development approaches, we have brought a bottom-up approach to sustainable peacebuilding, building cross-community and cross-border relations and partnerships. Despite the important role played by women, we have been historically underrepresented in decision making fora. The All Island Women's Forum, led by NWC, has contributed to a greater understanding of shared island challenges, and opportunities for progressive and peaceful social change through a gendered lens. The Forum provides a critical space for developing all island approaches to women's equality - building sustainable North-South links, a space for marginalised communities, and an enhanced understanding and intercommunity collaboration.

In collaboration with Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, NWC undertook a North/South initiative addressing intimate partner violence across the island of Ireland. The project seeking to enhance cross-border cooperation and develop an all-island approach, developed a comprehensive dialogue report (due to be published November 2024) outlining key recommendations and strategies to more effectively tackling intimate partner violence. This is an innovative and unique project across the island and for the first time is developing ways forward to tackle violence against women from an all- island perspective. NWC and its All-Island Forum can be utilised as a mechanism for developing harmonised policy initiatives North and South and developing all island policy solutions to advance women's rights and gender equality.

Key recommendations/indicators

- Increase core funding to the National Women's Council to advance full equality for women on an All-Island basis
- Resource and implement recommendations of the report of the All Island to Tackle VAW Group
- Ringfence specific funding in future Shared Island 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

ENDS