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National Women's Council

Pre-Budget Submission 2025

Summary
Document

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Budget 2025: A Feminist Budget

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

Budget 2025, as the last budget of this current Government, provides an opportunity to shape the next five years and lay the groundwork for significant advances in gender equality – and provides an opportunity for all political parties to set out their stall ahead of the General Election for what they will do to promote women's rights and advance gender equality between now and 2030.

Budget 2025 must invest in universal public services that support women

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. All of these crises hit women harder, because women continue to have lower incomes, less wealth, fewer resources, while shouldering the greater share of unpaid care responsibilities. Budget 2025 must tackle the inequalities faced by women head-on and tackle structural gender inequalities by investing in public services and social infrastructure. To do so, Budget 2025 must emphasise large-scale investment and structural reform of public services, and not tax cuts and minor tweaks.

Budget 2025 must tackle all forms of gender inequality

An all-of-Government, cross-departmental approach to tackling all forms of gender inequality is necessary. All budgeting decisions under each department must be gender and equality proofed, and Budget 2025 should focus on the key issues facing women today, including:

- **Childcare:** deliver a universal, affordable, accessible public system of Early Childhood Education + Care
- **Housing:** end women's homelessness and the housing + accommodation crisis
- **Mental Health:** ensure access to gender-sensitive mental health services which meet women's needs
- **Climate/Environment:** centre feminist climate justice in the transition to a caring, climate-friendly society
- **Social Protection:** achieve an adequate level of income for all women

Childcare: deliver a universal, affordable, accessible public system of Early Childhood Education + Care

Despite significant increases in funding for early years in recent budgets, affordability and lack of access for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is an issue for families across the country.

Increasing costs and lack of places and provision, particularly in certain areas and among marginalised groups, is making access to ECEC increasingly difficult for many women, children and families. Lack of accessible and affordable childcare is the single biggest barrier to women's equal participation in society. Historically, women have shouldered the majority of care and support responsibilities, which often leads to career or education interruptions, lower wages, and limited opportunities for advancement – and curtails their ability to participate fully in political, social, economic and community life.

Structural reform of the system is essential to ensure accessibility, affordability and universal provision for all families and children. Countries with public systems have demonstrated greater affordability, accessibility, and quality in their services, with better pay, security and conditions for workers. A fully public-funded and public-delivered system of Early Childhood Education and Care is an absolute necessity to advance gender equality and build a care sector that works for all children, women, families, educators and providers.

Public Provision of ECEC

Systems with public provision of Early Childhood Education and Care tend to be designed to ensure equitable access to all regardless of income or social status, with focus on the public good.

- **Deliver a fully public funded and provided system of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), including through increased investment in ECEC to 1% of national income by 2030 – with an additional €300m in Budget 2025, and €1.6bn by 2030; begin this process by:**
 - Following last year's increases, increase investment in affordability measures to further reduce childcare costs, alongside targeted measures to ensure universal accessibility + affordability to all families and children
 - Pilot the rollout of publicly-run, affordable ECEC services, based on the not-for-profit community model, alongside existing private provision – prioritising areas and communities that are currently marginalised or underserved
 - Ring-fenced funding for educators' wages

Housing: end women's homelessness and the housing + accommodation crisis

The housing, homelessness and accommodation emergency continues to have a devastating impact on women and families. Ireland has one of the highest rates of female homelessness in the EU², and particular groups of marginalised women are affected by the housing, homelessness and accommodation crisis in different ways. Traveller and Roma women, disabled women, migrant women, older women, victims/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 the leading cause of homelessness for women and children.

The state must dramatically increase in its own direct provision of housing, focusing on the provision of social, cost-rental and affordable homes – alongside strengthening tenants' rights and implementing targeted policies to ensure access to housing and accommodation for marginalised women. Housing policy must deliver secure, affordable accommodation for all, ensuring that all housing strategy, policy and provision is gender-sensitive.

No. of people accessing emergency accommodation 20–26 th May 2024 ¹
3,810 women
4,316 children

- **Build more homes:**
 - Increase investment in state-led housing for provision of social, affordable and cost-rental homes, gender-proofing all housing policies and investment
- **Strengthen rights for tenants:**
 - 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, and increase spending on tenant protections and private rent inspections
 - Legislate to bring licensee arrangements under the Residential Tenancy Act
- **Ensure access to housing for marginalised women, including Traveller and Roma women, disabled women, older women, victim-survivors of DSGBV, women leaving prison, and lone parents through a range of targeted measures, including secure long-term housing options**

¹ Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage (2024) [Monthly Homelessness Report May 2024](#)
² Bretheron, J. and Mayock, P. (2021) [Women's Homelessness \(European Evidence Review\)](#)

Mental Health: ensure access to gender-sensitive mental health services which meet women’s needs

A wealth of research has demonstrated that gender is a significant determinant of mental health difficulties.⁴ Many of the risk factors for experiencing mental health difficulties – poverty, violence, low socioeconomic status, insecure employment, and responsibility for care of others – disproportionately impact women.

Sharing the Vision, our national mental health policy, commits to the development of gender sensitive mental health services that meet the needs of women and girls. Providing **gender-sensitive services** allows for flexible and accessible services which respond equitably to the diverse needs of all women (in terms of mental health presentations, pathways to services and supports, access to and experiences of services).

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. Budget 2025 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.

What is Gender-Sensitive Health Care?

“Gender-sensitive approaches to health care recognise how socio-political and cultural factors, in addition to biological factors, shape care needs, care delivery and impact of health outcomes. Gender sensitivity considers the impact of multiple marginalisations e.g. when gender intersects with race, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic factors.”³

- **An additional €115 million to be allocated to mental health, including:**
 - A commitment to a long-term funding strategy which brings the mental health allocation to +10% of the overall health budget by 2030
 - Reinstatement of 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
 - 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
 - Establishment of Ireland’s first Mother & Baby Unit to provide in-patient care and support for mothers experiencing very severe and complex perinatal mental health difficulties; this should be complemented with increased investment in the development and implementation of an updated Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Model of Care

³ NWC (2023) [Gender-sensitive Mental Health](#), p. 7

⁴ NWC (2023) [Gender-sensitive Mental Health](#)

Climate/Environment: centre feminist climate justice in the transition to a caring, climate-friendly society

2025 marks the end of the country's first Carbon Budget, and it marks five years to fulfil our obligations under the Sustainable Development Goals. Action on climate and biodiversity must be at the core of Budget 2025. The climate crisis threatens to exacerbate the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis, the housing crisis, and the aftereffects of both COVID-19 and austerity – disproportionately impacting women and marginalised groups.

Climate mitigation and adaptation policies have different effects for men and women, and they must be gender and equality-proofed. Investment in social infrastructure must be central to the green transition. Care work is green work, and must be at the core of a new economic model and society.

Transport is not a gender-neutral issue. We need an inclusive approach to transport infrastructure, ensuring that all needs are catered for – those of women, disabled people, people in rural Ireland and all members of marginalised communities.

The enormous increase in energy costs since the Russian invasion of Ukraine has hit many of the most marginalised people in Ireland the hardest. 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.

Women + Energy Poverty

One in three households in Ireland are classified as living in energy poverty⁵

Those most impacted by energy poverty are **lone parents renting private accommodation**⁶

- **Gender, equality and poverty-proof all climate policies and investment**
- **Tackle energy poverty by:**
 - Targeting and increasing investment in retrofitting schemes and measures prioritising marginalised groups and those affected by energy poverty
 - Expanding and increasing the Fuel Allowance:
 - Increase the rate of payment, and payable period to 32 weeks
 - Extend eligibility to those in receipt of Working Family Payment
- **Reduce the cost of public transport for people who struggle to access it by:**
 - Introducing a new integrated transport scheme for disabled people
 - Expanding the Free Travel Scheme to international protection applicants and those feeling domestic violence
 - Continue extending the Young Adult Travel Card and implement zero cost travel for children and teenagers

⁵ ESRI (2022) [Energy Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland](#)

⁶ Dukelow, F., Forde, C. and Busteded, E. (2024) [Feminist Climate Justice Report](#), p. 67

Social Protection: achieve an adequate level of income for all women

Our work and social protection systems were built on a largely ‘male breadwinner’ understanding of both the labour market and social protection systems – resulting in significant gender gaps in income, wealth, pensions, and access to supports.

Gender Pay/Pensions Gap ¹⁰	
Overall (mean hourly)	9.6%
Private sector	17.5%
Public sector	-0.2%
Working Pattern Gap ¹¹	28.3%
Gender Pension Gap ¹²	35%

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

Deprivation rate (SILC 2023 ⁷)	
Overall population	17.3%
Women	18.7%
Lone parents ⁸	45.6%
Unable to work ⁹	44.7%

We need significant structural reform of our social protection system to support all forms of social participation while ensuring no one is left without the income they need to live.

- **Increase base social protection rates to restore purchasing power and move towards adequacy, as recommended by the Vincentian MESL Research Centre¹³**
 - Raise **base social protection rates** by **€20**
 - Raise **Increase for a Qualified Child** rates by **€6** for <12 and **€15** for 12+
- **Benchmark social protection payments to MESL**
 - Establish the *MESL* as the benchmark for social protection payments by 2026
 - Adjust income disregards, means tests and eligibility thresholds to reflect changes in social protection rates and the Living Wage/National Min. Wage
- **Introduce a Universal State Pension**
 - Move towards a Universal State Pension for all; and benchmark it at 34% of average earnings as called for by the Pension Promise Campaign
- **Adopt a fully individualised social protection system so that women are treated as individuals, rather than dependents of their partners**

⁷ CSO (2024) [Survey on Income and Living Conditions](#), Table 5.1

⁸ Household type: *Lone parent with at least one child aged less than 25*

⁹ Principal Economic Status (aged 16 years and over): *Unable to work due to long-standing health problems*

¹⁰ CSO (2023) [Structure of Earnings Survey](#), Table 3.1

¹¹ *Part-time mean hourly pay for women compared to full-time mean hourly pay for men*

¹² ESRI (2019) [Gender, pensions and income in retirement](#)

¹³ Vincentian MESL Centre (2024) [MESL 2024 Report and Pre-Budget Submission](#)