

## **Implementation of the agreed conclusions on ‘Women’s empowerment and the link to sustainable development’**

*Submitted by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland on 21.09.2020*

### **1. What measures have been taken to strengthen normative, legal and policy frameworks for the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?**

The Equality Budgeting Initiative launched by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in 2017 is continuing, guided by the Equality Budgeting Expert Advisory Group. Dedicated equality indicators are published in the annual Revised Estimates and an Equality Budgeting Update included in the annual Public Service Performance Reports.

The initial focus on gender is incrementally being extended to other equality dimensions. In its Programme for Government published in June 2020, the present Government has committed to expanding the Equality Budgeting programme across government departments and agencies, and to look at the outcomes of expenditure as they relate to people with disabilities. The Government also aims over the next 5 years to use wellbeing indicators as well as economic indicators to point out inequalities and help ensure that policies are driven by a desire to do better by people. The OECD was invited to undertake a Policy Scan of Ireland’s approach to Equality Budgeting programme; their report was published in October 2019 and delivered 12 recommendations. One key recommendation was the development of an equalities data strategy which would rely on improved availability of disaggregated data. The Central Statistics Office (CSO) is conducting an audit of existing data from an equality perspective, which will be published.

The above initiative arises from an objective in the National Strategy for Women and Girls, an evaluation of which is planned over the coming months as it draws to a conclusion. The Government has committed in the Programme for Government to develop and implement a new National Strategy for Women and Girls.

### **2. What actions and investments have been made for financing gender equality and the empowerment of women?**

Projects aimed at women returning to the workforce and women's entrepreneurship continued to be supported in 2019 and 2020 under the European Social Fund’s (ESF) Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL), which is co-funded by the European Union. This includes funding of €5.8m announced in October 2019 for 17 projects successful in an Open Call, and is in addition to €5.5m of funding awarded to 18 projects in 2017.

Grant funding for programmes involving activation and outreach for disadvantaged women, amounting to over €1.4m in each of 2019 and 2020, has continued to be made available by the Department of Justice and Equality to the National Collective of Community based Women's Networks (NCCWN), which consists of 17 women's groups in various parts of the country.

In January 2020, Enterprise Ireland published an Action Plan for Women in Business, as part of Future Jobs Ireland, the whole-of-Government framework to prepare businesses and workers for the future. Under the plan grants will be available to companies for recruiting part-time senior managers, and a series of funding calls will target women entrepreneurs and women researchers from third level institutions. In July, Enterprise Ireland announced a further Competitive Start Fund for women entrepreneurs, with a total of €1m available to award up to €50,000 in equity funding to successful projects. This is the fifth year of this programme. A new phase of the ACORNS programme, a successful development initiative for female entrepreneurs living in rural Ireland, supported by the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine, launched in August 2020. The programme will support over 200 new participants in the coming months while continuing to support participants from the previous 5 cycles through further development phases.

Ireland tracks international development expenditure using a gender equality policy marker – a statistical tool to record development cooperation activities that target gender equality as a policy objective. There are also two specific purpose codes relevant to tracking expenditure on gender equality: the code for tracking funding for women’s organisations and movements and the code for tracking funding in support of ending violence against women and girls. Ireland is committed to reporting annually to the OECD DAC on whether our bilateral allocable development cooperation expenditure targets gender equality.

### **3. What steps have been taken to bolster women’s leadership and women’s full and equal participation in decision-making in all areas of sustainable development?**

Two reports were published during 2019 by the Balance for Better Business Review Group, an independent business-led initiative established by the Government to improve gender balance in senior business leadership in Ireland. The group has set progressive targets over a 5 year period for the achievements of gender balance on the boards and in the senior management of Irish-registered companies listed on the Stock Exchange, and for large private companies. New statistics published in March 2020 indicate progress has been made against the targets, and a further report is expected in late 2020.

There is a long-standing Government objective to achieve at least 40% representation of each gender in the membership of State Boards. By December 2018, although the average gender balance across all State Boards stood at 41.5% female and 58.5% male members, less than half (48%) of individual Boards had met the 40% target. Work is ongoing across Government Departments on implementing a series of recommendations made by an inter-departmental group in March 2019. New guidelines published in September 2020 by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform provide for greater transparency and require State bodies which have not yet reached the 40% target to set out measures to deliver on the target.

Women have a strong representation across the dedicated governance structure established in late January 2020 to support the national response to COVID-19 to ensure a public health-led, whole-of-society approach. In particular, the National Public Health Emergency Team, which provides national direction, guidance, support and expert advice on the development and implementation of a strategy to contain COVID-19 in Ireland, has a gender balanced membership that is 42% female and 58% male.

### **4. What macroeconomic, labour and social policies have been put in place that promote full and productive employment and decent work for women, in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women’s employment and economic rights and independence?**

With the gradual lifting of restrictions and re-opening of the economy, the Government’s July stimulus package provided for the continuation and gradual phasing out of the emergency income supports, with measures aimed at get as many people as possible back to work quickly. It also included a €200 million investment in training and education, skills development, work placement schemes, recruitment subsidies, and job search and assistance measures, to help those who have lost their jobs find a new one, retrain, or develop new skills, in particular for emerging growth sectors.

A plan for the medium-term outlook, Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19, has been put in place from September 2020 and sets out a framework for restrictive measures in response to COVID-19. The approach taken prioritises some activities over others, including health and social care services, education and other essential needs, and aims to strike a balance between protecting work and economic activity and allowing as much of society and business to continue as normally as possible while continuing to make every effort to suppress the virus.

These new measures complement existing measures, the most important of which are the One-Parent Family Payment (OFP), the Jobseekers Transitional Payment and the Back to Work Family Dividend.

The vast majority of parents in one-parent families in Ireland are women. One-Parent Family Payment (OFP) is a payment for parents under 66 who are bringing children up (between the ages of 0-7) without the support of a partner. The Jobseeker's Transitional payment is a special arrangement under the Jobseeker's

Allowance (JA) scheme that aims to support lone parents into the workforce while they have young children between the ages of 7-13. The policy objective of the One-Parent Family Payment scheme is to support lone parents with young children and to reduce long-term social welfare dependency and associated poverty by ending the expectation that lone parents will remain outside of the workforce indefinitely. It also aims to increase the opportunities for lone parents to enter into and increase employment by providing them with enhanced access to the range of education, training, and employment supports that make up the DEASP's Intreo services.

Jobseeker's Transitional Payment focuses on "soft activation" to incentivise lone parents to re-engage with the labour market as their child grows up. The payment also offers a tapered support to these customers as their children get older. Customers on this scheme have full access to the Intreo activation and case management service. Jobseeker's Transitional Payment allows Jobseeker's Allowance customers to balance their work and caring responsibilities while also supporting them to move towards sustainable employment. As such, no lone parent with a youngest child aged under 14 years is required to take up employment or training in order to receive the income support.

The Back to Work Family Dividend (BTWFD) scheme helps families move from welfare into work. It gives financial support to people with qualified children who are in or take up employment or self-employment and stop claiming a Jobseeker's payment or One-Parent Family Payment. The scheme allows the eligible parent to retain the child income support portion of their social assistance payment as they transition from welfare to work. Those on the scheme receive a weekly payment for up to 2 years. For the first year the amount is 100% of the qualified child increase (up to a maximum of four children). This will reduce to 50%, or half that amount, for the second year. The objective of this payment is to mitigate against the social welfare cliff which may deter some customers from transitioning from social welfare.

**5. What response and recovery measures to the COVID-19 pandemic have been taken to improve and expand social protection for women (e.g., healthcare coverage, unemployment benefits, paid sick leave, paid parental leave, maternity benefits, pensions, income support such as cash transfers)?**

As restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 were put in place from March 2020, an emergency income support package was introduced aimed at keeping people in employment as much as possible, and providing replacement income for those who had lost jobs. These measures were available equally to women and men, and included the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, a Pandemic Unemployment Payment for which the self-employed were also eligible and a special Covid-19 Illness Payment. Sector-specific measures brought in included funds for the arts sector and the childcare sector and supports for the retail sector, all large employers of women. These measures are detailed in the National Action Plan in response to COVID-19 (Coronavirus).

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was made available to all employees and the self-employed who lost their job due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The July Jobs Stimulus saw the PUP extended until April 2020, with support gradually aligned with existing social welfare rates on a phased basis. The PUP will remain open to new entrants until end-2020 given the need to continue supporting people through the next phase of the pandemic. The PUP was introduced at a flat rate of €350 per week in March 2020, amended in June to dual rates of €203 or €350 per week dependent on pre-Covid earnings. From September, three rates will apply, also dependent on pre-Covid earnings. Between February and April 2021, it is planned to migrate any workers remaining on the PUP to the normal jobseeker payment, which is €203 per week.

As part of the government's response to COVID 19, the PUP was paid concurrently with the three payments Working Family Payment (WFP), One-parent Family Payment (OFP) and, Jobseeker's Transitional Payment (JST). This means that anyone in receipt of One Parent Family Payment or Jobseeker's Transitional Payment who was also working, and who lost their job due to COVID-19, was eligible for PUP as well as their previous rate of the primary payment. The WFP payment was maintained at the previous rate and paid with the PUP.

The Working Family Payment (WFP) is an in-work support which provides an income top-up for employees on low earnings with children. It is designed to prevent in-work poverty for low paid workers with child dependents and to offer a financial incentive to take-up employment. Child benefit is a monthly payment made to families with children in respect of all qualified children up to the age of 16 years. The payment continues to be paid in respect of children until their 18th birthday who are in full-time education, or who have a disability. A child's eligibility for the payment expires once they reach 18 years, or finish education, whichever comes first. However, as part of the government's response to COVID 19 this cut-off point was extended to the child's 18th birthday rather than the end of second level education.

A Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme provided income support of over €2.8bn to employees between March and August. The TWSS initially provided a subsidy of 70% of net weekly wage, to a maximum contribution of €410. This was replaced by a new Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) providing a subsidy of up to €203 per week for eligible employers per employee. EWSS will be in place until 31 March 2021 so giving certainty to businesses and their employees. In that time it expected to support 350,000 jobs at a cost of €1.9bn. The effectiveness of the EWSS will be monitored closely and adapted if necessary.

Analysis indicates that sectors worst affected in terms of employment were also among the lowest income. At its peak in mid-May, the accommodation and food (90%), construction (81%), admin and support (65%) and retail (63%) sectors had the highest proportion of workers on PUP and TWSS. As the economy re-opened, PUP recipients have begun finding employment. The majority of current recipients have been in receipt of the payment since the first few weeks of the scheme. This trend is broadly consistent across age groups, sectors, as well as nationality and sex. Compared to current recipients, those who have exited PUP to work have been more likely to be classified as prime working age and typically have higher earnings.

Special COVID-19 sickness payments were also introduced (the Enhanced Illness Benefit payment), of €350 per week following Covid diagnosis.

The Irish Public Health System provides Medical Cards (full eligibility) and General Practitioner (GP) Visit Card (limited eligibility) services which are targeted towards low income households and marginalised groups. Individuals with full eligibility are entitled to a range of services including General Practitioner services, prescribed drugs and medicines, all public hospital services in public wards, including consultant services, all out-patient public hospital services, dental, ophthalmic and aural services and appliances, and a maternity and infant care service.

Just prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, the National Strategy for Women and Girls Strategy Committee established a sub-committee on period poverty, chaired by the Department of Health. Its remit includes establishing the extent of period poverty and population cohorts most at risk in Ireland and making recommendations with regard to education, stigma reduction, targeting of at-risk groups and mainstreaming period poverty mitigation measures across all relevant Government Departments and public bodies. The sub-committee is currently compiling a report of its work which will be submitted to the NSWG Strategy Committee in due course.

**6. What actions have been taken to expand the availability and affordability of care services to address the increase in unpaid care and domestic work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., care subsidies, paid leave)?**

There have been significant advances in family leaves in Ireland in recent years. The Parent's Leave and Benefit Act 2019 introduced two weeks paid leave for each parent in the child's first year, and also provides for an increase in Parent's Leave of up to 9 weeks by Ministerial order. The phased introduction of an additional 8 weeks unpaid parental leave was announced in 2019, from 18 to 22 working weeks in September 2019 and extending to 26 working weeks from September 2020 and also changes the maximum age of the child whose parent is entitled to unpaid parental leave from 8 to 12 years.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on children and parents, with many families experiencing significant stress due to the lack of family support and childcare. The Government is currently

considering a proposal to extend Parent's Leave and Benefit to five weeks to enable parents of young children to spend additional time with their child.

Following the introduction of restrictions in March, the Government also published its Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business (revised in June), indicating the circumstances in which the sectors of the economy and society could safely re-open. Among the sectors detailed in the plan were community health, education & childcare, and health & social care services. In the Government's Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021 Plan for Living with COVID-19, which sets out the risk management strategy for the next 6-9 months from September 2020, keeping schools, early childhood care and education, childcare and childminding services open in any escalation of restrictive measures will continue to be a Government priority in line with public health advice.

### **7. What action has been taken to increase resources and support for women's and civil society organizations as they cope with the COVID-19 pandemic?**

At an early stage in the Covid-19 pandemic, the Department of Justice and Equality led the development of an inter-agency action plan to help support those at risk of domestic abuse during the pandemic, published on 10 April. The plan, which recognises the added risk of domestic abuse some people face during this period and includes measures in partnership with women's organisations, has been kept under active review and is currently being updated. As part of this inter-agency plan and in addition to the funding already allocated for 2020, €285,000 was provided to a number of organisations working in the sector, to support and extend the existing services they offer during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In May, the Government announced two funding measures to support civil society during the pandemic, the COVID-19 Stability Fund and the Philanthropy Fund. The objective of the €35m Stability Fund is to assist community and voluntary, charity and social enterprises who are experiencing financial difficulties due to a reduction in their fundraising income or traded income as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The grants have been released beginning in June, and include grants to women's community organisations. The Philanthropy Fund, Innovate Together is another collaboration between Government, philanthropists and social innovations, focused on supporting innovative responses to the Covid-19 crisis.

### **8. What steps have been taken to improve gender-responsive data collection in the context of follow-up to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and to track and monitor the gender-specific impacts and response measures to the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Please see reference to work on the Equality Budgeting initiative, in response to Question 1, which relates to the wider context.

The collection and analysis of data is an important element of efforts in Ireland to track and monitor the impact and response measures to the COVID-19 pandemic, and includes an equality and gender-sensitive focus. COVID-19 case statistics are collected and published, disaggregated by sex and by age group among other factors. (Available at [www.hpsc.ie](http://www.hpsc.ie))

There are two research studies underway within the Department of Health which will contain gender-analysis.

- National study: TILDA Covid-19 survey (a survey on the social, behavioural, economic, and health impacts of covid-19 that will link with 10 years of data, and future data for a nationally representative longitudinal cohort of 5,000 people aged 50+ in Ireland).
- National study: Health literacy survey for Ireland collects information on health literacy, health status and healthy behaviours, mental health, healthcare utilisation, and impact and experience of covid-19. The nationally representative sample is 3,000 people aged 18+ in Ireland.

The Central Statistics Office has developed the COVID-19 Information Hub, to make available statistics tracking the changing state of aspects of Ireland's economy and society since the COVID-19 outbreak, with data sourced from a broad range of national and international sources. Where available, a gender

disaggregation is provided, and the themes covered by statistics are the economy, labour market, social and wellbeing, health, transport, energy and tourism.

The Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) is producing analyses from across government departments that deal with the response to Covid-19 and the impacts that it has on various sectors of the Irish economy. Recent papers include a profile of smartphone ownership and use, including disaggregations by age and gender.

With the aim of to delivering significant and timely impact for Ireland within the context of the current emergency, a joint rapid response call, the COVID-19 Rapid Response Funding Programme, was launched by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), Enterprise Ireland (EI), and IDA Ireland in March to fund research, development, and innovation (RD&I) activities. The call was closely co-ordinated with the rapid response call launched by the Health Research Board (HRB) and the Irish Research Council (IRC). Among the studies chosen for funding were projects on how to support mental health among frontline healthcare workers in a pandemic, a project on remote blood-pressure monitoring in pregnancy, and a survey on the social, behavioural, economic, and health impacts of COVID-19 for a nationally representative longitudinal cohort of 5,000 people aged 50+ in Ireland.

Other bodies producing data and analysis to inform the policy response include the Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI), which is conducting research on the potential impact of COVID-19 across areas including economic growth, employment and human behaviour. Its recent papers include a study of public understanding and perception of the COVID-19 Test-and-Trace system in Ireland.