

IRELAND

AUSTERITY, GENDER INEQUALITY AND FEMINISM

Austerity, gender and inequality - post-recession Ireland?

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Because of the persistent nature of economic disadvantage – and its gendered nature - inequality deepened over the crisis years in Ireland. This process has only partially been reversed. A central reason for the continuing high levels of gendered inequality is the absence of, or chronically low level of investment in public services, combined with a lack of political and corporate responsibility for urgently needed social infrastructure on care. This is linked to deeply embedded structural inequalities on the basis of social class, ethnicity, disability as well as gender. Ireland is a highly unequal society and specific minorities, have consistently been discriminated against and disadvantaged before, during and after the recent economic crisis. Within each of these groups or sectors, women face multiple forms of disadvantage and discrimination.

The crisis that hit Ireland in 2008 was marked by a collapse in the banking sector, linked to the implosion of an overblown property market, which together resulted in a dramatic contraction of the construction industry (Barry and Conroy 2015; Barry 2017; Murphy 2018). Tax revenue collapsed and enormous amounts of public funds (including significant borrowings under rules laid down by the European Central Bank) were diverted to *bail-out* the banking sector - turning *private debt* into an enormous level of *public debt*. In its aftermath, severe austerity measures were introduced against a background of spiralling male unemployment, which quickly spread across the services sector and engulfed the entire economy, resulting in very high levels of household poverty and inequality. Their stated aim was to address the crisis in public finances. However, the more insidious consequences of austerity policies have meant that specific social sectors suffered particularly badly. Analyses of successive Irish austerity budgets have clearly revealed that disadvantaged women (lone parents in particular)

were disproportionately negatively affected and that whole new levels of marginalisation and inequality were generated in housing, precarious employment, household debt, poverty and access to health care (Barry, 2017; Cullen and Murphy 2017).

Despite significant progress towards women's economic independence, women in Ireland are still economically disadvantaged in many ways. Women are still far less likely to be in the labour force and more than four times more likely to work on a part-time basis than men. Women on average earn less than 14.4 % than men and are less likely to work in occupations that are highest paid. Women are 25 times more likely to look after their home and family...There is increasing evidence that the recession and austerity have hit women particularly badly. Yet, public discussions and proposed solutions to the recession are not informed by any type of gender analysis (National Women's Council of Ireland 2019).

EU SILC (CSO 2019) data throw up some stark truths about the way in which long-term inequality has been exacerbated during the crisis years. Poverty levels had reached their lowest point in Ireland in 2009 when 14.1% of the population were classified as poor. Since then the rate has increased and life on a low income is the norm for a large proportion of Irish society affecting 15.7%, or one in every six people in Ireland. Women are more likely to be at risk of poverty and social exclusion than are men (23.5: 21.8) and this is true for older women aged 65 and over where the gender gap is much wider. For single parent households the risk of poverty and exclusion is 65.9% and in this regard Ireland is ranked number one in the EU-28. Child poverty is a grim reality for one in every five children in Ireland, despite the fact the Ireland is a relatively wealthy economy. So, while Ireland does have a relatively high level of redistribution – through the taxation and welfare systems – base line income inequality is at an extremely high level and consequently long-term dependency is systematically built into economic and social systems. In 2017, if all social transfers were excluded from income, the at risk of poverty rate would have been 43.8% (CSO 2019).

A series of so-called *emergency measures* were introduced between 2010-12 including a freeze on public sector employment, contraction in pension entitlements, a cap on many welfare payments, dismantling of critical equality infrastructure, a Universal Social Charge (USC) and a new two-tier system of recruitment into the public sector. Each of these measures was heralded as *emergency* and *short-term*, for the duration of the crisis - but this has not proven to be the case. Industrial action is currently planned for February 2020 protesting penalisation of second-tier new entrants into teaching and nursing (women-dominated professions). And while reductions in the rates of USC have been introduced, USC continues to be charged on gross incomes, five years into post-recession Ireland (Barry 2017).

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Labour market, care and gendered economic inequalities

Positive increases in paid employment have been highlighted as evidence that Ireland is in a post-crisis-recovery period, marked by an increase in the paid employment rate of the 20-64 age group: among women from 61.0% to 68.0% and among men from 71.8% to 80.0% over the 2013-2018 time period. However, Ireland has yet to reach its pre-crisis employment rate in 2008 of 78%. Part-time workers account for over 50% of all National Minimum Wage (NMW) employees and approximately 80% of these are female (see Appendix). Women-dominated employment sectors have been subject to aggressive casualisation and the erosion of pay and security. A consultation process on tackling the gender pay gap published in 2018 by Dept of Justice and Equality (DJE) identified the key contributing factors as: women's unequal share of caring and domestic responsibilities; lack of affordable quality childcare; women's concentration in low-paid and precarious work; women's underrepresentation in senior and decision-making posts; gender discrimination, unconscious bias; cultural stereotyping of certain work roles; inflexibility in working conditions and lack of transparency in pay structures. A statement from the NWCI (2018) reinforces the need to read the issue of gender pay inequalities against a complex cultural backdrop that requires a range of remedial actions.

We must look at addressing wider inequalities for women that feed into the Gender Pay Gap, such as the high proportion of women working in low paid sectors, such as retail, childcare

or the hospitality sector. Aligning the minimum wage with the living wage, and investing in affordable, accessible, quality childcare will all positively impact greater pay equality between women and men. (NWCI 2018)

There are fundamental impediments to women's integration into paid employment. The low level of public provision of quality childcare is a central cause, but so too is the socio-cultural gap between male and female participation in household work, elder care and emotional labour. In 2017, 54.2% of Irish women outside the paid labour market reported caring responsibilities as the main reason (against an EU average of 31%). Characteristics of households marginalised on the labour market have been identified as including higher levels of unemployment, lower education levels, higher rates of disability, households more likely to contain children and more likely to be headed by a lone parent, to be in the manual social class, and in rented social housing. Some positive new policies on childcare have been introduced but Ireland is a long-way from a comprehensive childcare system with affordable costs and quality care. New measures have been introduced mainly to provide public support for limited childcare provision for 3-5 year olds. It is widely acknowledged that these changes are slow to be reflected in labour market trends and consequently are the reason behind Ireland's above average gender employment gap.

Ireland has one of the highest rates of low pay among OECD countries (OECD 2019) and has the fourth highest proportion of low paid workers - the majority of whom are women - accounting for 60% of minimum wage workers. Women (29%) are much more likely than men (19%) to be in low paid work and many more are in casualised, informal employment where protections are negligible. A recent report (NERI 2019) reveals the scale and composition of low pay in *post-recession* Ireland - 25% of employees earn less than the (then) Living Wage of €11.45 per hour. Their research highlighted that low pay is prevalent among women, young and migrant workers; those in retail, hotels and security sectors; lone parents and those on temporary contracts. The highest proportion of those experiencing deprivation and consistent poverty emerged as among low paid employees living in households that are forced into debt for day-to-day living costs and experience

deprivation (Low Pay Commission 2016, NERI Report 2019; NESI 2018). There are strong voices that have campaigned for a *Living Wage* and refundable tax credits (rather than a minimum wage) that would be more closely aligned to the cost of living. Social Justice Ireland argues that:

“What is clear is that the austerity measures and broader policy initiatives which have been pursued in many EU countries have resulted in the erosion of social services and lead to the further exclusion of people who already find themselves on the margins of society. This is in direct contradiction to the inclusive growth focus of the Europe 2020 Strategy.” (Social Justice Ireland 2019).

A new report on precarious work in 2018 profiled precarious work and revealed that insecure jobs are common in hospitality, retail, care-work and early education - all areas in which women predominate. Concerns have been expressed by women's organisations that the precarious jobs that were associated with the Irish labour market throughout the crisis years and into economic recovery looks increasingly likely to persist. One important new measure was introduced in March 2019 to create a greater entitlement to certainty and consistency of hours of work (Barry and Feeley 2020). Data also shows that those that are accessing paid employment are not finding the hours of work they want, and it is now evident that nearly 33% of part-time workers in Ireland do not want to work part-time and are underemployed - this accounts for 8% of the workforce, predominantly women (Barry and Feeley 2020; European Commission 2019).

Gendered welfare system

Significant sections of women, including many women pensioners, are designated as dependants under an Irish welfare system that applies a traditional 'male-breadwinner', household-based structure and in which many women do not have independent claimant status. Social welfare regulations have an impact on accessing the formal labour market in Ireland. Those signing on for *Job Seekers Allowance* (JSA) in Ireland must demonstrate that they are available for, and actively seeking, full-time employment. Many women, looking for part-time employment in order to combine paid employment and care responsibilities are thus not eligible for JSA. This discriminates against and creates dependency for thousands of women, restricting access to the full range of labour market activation programmes. One further element created in the post-recession years is the gap between the State pension age (which increases to 67 years in 2020) and the retirement age of 65, affecting mainly women who are mostly dependent on the State non-contributory pension. One measure, welcomed by the largely female public sector, is new legislation which came into force on December 2018 allowing public sector workers to opt to continue working until 69 years of age - but the retirement age is still 65 years across the private sector (Barry and Feeley 2020).

Austerity policies introduced in the crisis years have had very specific negative consequences on lone parents who are recipients of the One Parent Family Payment (OPFP). 94% of lone parents dependent on welfare in Ireland are women, experience the highest levels of poverty and social exclusion (56% - see appendix) and are particularly impacted

by the low level and high cost of childcare provision. Lone parents with low skills and levels of educational attainment are almost 5 times more likely to experience in-work poverty than other households with children. One in five children are living in households experiencing poverty, many of these are lone parent or large households on low pay and/or dependent on welfare.

One hugely negative measure introduced during the economic crisis years was targeted at lone parents on welfare, and which saw the critical *earnings disregard* (enabling many to re-attach to paid employment) severely cut. The *earnings disregard* refers to the amount a lone parent on welfare can earn before they lose part of their welfare payment and it fell from €146.50 per week to €60.0 per week (over the period 2010 to 2015). The savage nature of this cut has partially been reversed over more recent budgets closing the gap to €36.50 per week, but this still leaves a substantial gap in the level of earnings that are allowed for before loss of benefits kicks in and is insufficient to alleviate poverty traps for lone parents. Another significant budgetary change over the crisis years was the reduction of the age threshold of the youngest child (in establishing eligibility for OPFP) from 18 years (or 22 if the child is still in full-time education) to 7 years. The new arrangements mean that those who no longer qualified for the OPFP were transferred to a form of JSA. In a concession to strong campaigning by lone parents and women's organisations, conditions for JSA were made more flexible (Barry and Feeley 2019). Analysing the impact of Budget 2019 measures on lone parents, Cullen and Murphy conclude:

“While reversal of One Parent Family income disregards is welcome, the reality is that the re-structuring of that payment remains intact with the result that there are now only 39,000 recipients compared to the pre-crisis level of 87,840 in 2008. Lone parents with children over 13 do not benefit from any income disregard reversal, and regardless of any care obligations, are required to seek and accept full time employment (Cullen and Murphy 2017)

Together, these changes have reversed some of the measures taken during the austerity years that saw lone parents disproportionately af-

ected by the recession. However, the failure to recognise that those who care alone for families need financial and social supports with older children and teenagers, as well as younger children, is a barrier to accessing education, training and employment. It is increasingly recognised that lone parents are prevented from availing of employment opportunities by a combination of low pay and the prohibitive costs of childcare (IHREC 2019; Barry and Feeley 2019).

The latest analysis from the St Vincent de Paul shows that between 2012 and 2017, while the economy recovered and unemployment levels fell, the poverty rate among working lone parents more than doubled. Our percentage of working lone parents, at 58%, is the lowest in the euro zone. Childcare costs were identified by 60% of lone parents as a disincentive to entering the workforce while 45% regarded housing costs as a heavy burden. Some corrective actions were introduced in the last budget.

Of particular concern, is the growing issue of in-work poverty among these families. In 2012, 1-in-11 working lone parents were living in poverty; by 2017 this had increased to 1-in-5. High housing and childcare costs combined with low levels of income, mean that it is challenging for many families with children to make ends meet. These factors significantly reduce the standard of living of working lone parents who face additional challenges as both the primary earner and primary caregiver for their families. It also creates additional barriers to employment for those who want to take up work or increase their working hours (St Vincent de Paul, 2019).

3

Unequal Distribution of Care

Gender inequality in Ireland is very clearly evident in the unequal distribution of care responsibilities that underwrite many other economic, cultural and political gendered injustices.

This gendered inequality in care includes the gender pay, earnings and pension gaps that mean that women are more likely to be poor both in younger and older age, because they are culturally the default carers in Irish society (Barry and Feeley 2016).

According to the 2016 Census figures nearly all of the people (98%) who were looking after home or family on a full-time basis were women (although the number of men in this grouping increased the ten years up to 2016, rising from 4,900 to 9,200) (CSO 2016). A report on caring and unpaid work revealed that on average, women spend double the time of men on caring and more than twice as much time on housework – this substantial gender gap persists even among men and women doing the same amount of paid work (Barry and Feeley 2019). This study also shows that over half of those carrying out unpaid care work are juggling these responsibilities with employment, and that women are overrepresented among those who avail of reduced hours in order to facilitate care and unpaid work. During the recessionary years between 2007 and 2011 the time spent by men on care and housework rose, but this returned to 2007 levels in 2016, suggesting this was a response to the economic shock of the recession rather than an underlying shift in behaviour. In its recent report on Ireland, Oxfam makes a direct link between gendered inequality and the undervaluing of care work:

“Dramatic inequality is continuing to grow, and it’s continuing to have a huge impact on poverty and fighting poverty. Sexist economies are fuelling the inequality crisis – enabling a wealthy elite to accumulate vast fortunes at the expense of ordinary people and particularly women and girls. Our upside-down economic system deepens inequality by chronically undervaluing care work – usually done by women and girls. Unpaid care work is the ‘hidden engine’ that keeps the wheels of our economies, businesses and societies moving.” (Oxfam 2020).

A key strategy that has been identified in combatting poverty risk of children is through the tapered withdrawal of benefits and supplementary payments upon return to employment. Women-headed households and households with three or more children are the majority of low-income households in Ireland, and the abrupt withdrawal of benefits is a significant factor in trapping women and children in poverty and unemployment.

Rise in gender-based violence (GBV)

The focus on gender equality in Beijing PfA, UN Sustainable Development Goals and EU Strategy for Gender Equality all highlight the importance of GBV. Combatting GBV and protecting and supporting its victims is challenging in Ireland for many reasons including underreporting and incomplete data. Reported GBV increased during the crisis years and shows no signs of lessening in the post-recession Ireland. Official data for Ireland (very much inadequate and out-of-date) reveal that women are most frequently subjected to sexual abuse and the proportion of women reporting has increased (between 2012 and 2015) of both rape (from 18% to 21%) and sexual harassment (from 46% to 52%). Recent data show that women account for 82% of all victims of reported sexual offences. While under 2% of men are documented as experiencing rape, a significant proportion – over 16% in 2015 - report experiencing sexual harassment. There is no doubt that the focus on different forms of sexual abuse over more recent years would see these figures rise substantially as more and more women report sexual crimes. A new study on sexual assault and violence has eventually been promised for 2023 and that will lead to new understandings of change - in the meantime there is a real paucity of data.

On International Women's Day 2019, the Irish Government ratified the Istanbul Treaty and committed to further strengthening actions combatting all forms of violence against women. Women's groups have lobbied for this action over a number of years and the move has been widely welcomed. To comply with the Convention, the NWCI estimates that an additional 331 emergency bed spaces are re-

quired throughout the country. Reduced funding to front-line services and increased demand for services over the crisis years resulted in a high proportion of calls that could not be answered on helplines and women and children being turned away due to lack of refuge spaces. For women subjected to domestic violence and sexual abuse access to housing is vital, particularly in the context of the current and immediate housing crisis that has engulfed the Irish economy, as a result of the lack of public housing provision over the last ten years (Barry and Feeley, 2019).

5

Housing and homelessness

The period in Ireland since the economic crisis in 2008, throughout austerity and towards recovery has brought us in 2020 to a point where housing has never been more unequal and an unprecedented housing crisis now persists. Many households that are particularly vulnerable to poverty and increasing indebtedness have been forced into homelessness over the last decade and post-recession Ireland has yet to make a difference to the level of the homeless crisis. Property speculation was central to the global recession and overstimulation of the housing market was a fundamental factor in Ireland's economic crash. The cost of housing in the private rented sector has risen dramatically in recent years with rents in Dublin now higher than their peak in 2008. At the same time, rent assistance payments have failed to increase in line with rising rents pricing more and more people out of a home. A fifth of all households in the state are now reliant on the private rental sector for housing but it is a key source of homelessness due to lack of security of tenure and increasingly unaffordable rents. One of the striking aspects of this is the increasing and terrible burden of homelessness that is visited on women and children. Latest figures show the number of children experiencing homelessness rose by 36% from 2016 to 2018 - often because accommodation that was offered for a family with children was unfit for purpose. Women now account for 42% of the number of adult homeless and this has increased from 34% over the last two years alone. This figure increases to 44% in Dublin.

A report of the Joint Committee on Social Protection (2017) on the position of lone parents in Ireland confirmed that homelessness disproportionately affects lone parent families. Of families living in emergency accommodation, 66% were lone parent families and 30% of those on the social housing waiting list were also lone parent households. This is a repeating pattern of gendered disadvantage. In 2015, three times the proportion of single parent households were affected by rising house costs, than were households without children. Given that women manage most single parent households, this reflects the gendered impact of the housing crisis that deeply damages the daily lives and security of women and children. Housing costs are a major area of expenditure for all families, especially those where women are coping alone and yet this distinction is not always recognised.

The important new Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) is critically structured using a tapered withdrawal system, particularly crucial in that it has been introduced in the context of an extremely serious and growing problem of homelessness and a lack of significant levels of public, social or affordable house building. Renting privately does not provide families and children with a secure and affordable family home, where they can settle down, go to the same school, or create a community. Government policy is dominated by a neo-liberal ideology that favours the private marketplace, and despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, an unfounded expectation that the private market (with certain targeted stimuli) will resolve the housing crisis. There is no commitment to investment in a significant social or public housing programme that would create access to those on low to middle incomes to affordable housing.

Increasing evidence of discrimination

The latest data on equality and discrimination in Ireland was released by the CSO in July 2019 (CSO 2019). In the two years prior to 2019, 18% of persons aged 18 years and over reported having experienced some form of discrimination. Just 3% of people who experienced discrimination made any form of official complaint. When comparing the experience of men and women, 29.1% of females stated cited gender as a ground for discrimination experienced, compared with 7.8% of men. Over one fifth (27.6%) of men believed that race/skin colour/ethnic group/nationality was a perceived ground for discrimination cited by 28.4% of men, compared with 16% of women. Reported instances of discrimination against women have increased from 11.8% in 2010 to 18.8% in 2019. Against men in the same period, reports of discrimination increased from 11.6% to 16.6%. It is clearly evident that there is widespread discrimination against minorities in Ireland that occurs mainly on the basis of membership of the Traveller community, colour, ethnicity and disability. Almost one in eight people in Ireland report that they had experienced discrimination over the preceding two years. Evidence of growing inequality is revealed, for example, among those with disabilities whose employment rates is abysmally low at 26.2% (the lowest rate in the EU which has a compared average rate of 48.1%). Compared to White Irish respondents, Black respondents are three times more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace and in access to public services, and over four times more likely to experience discrimination in access to private services. White non-Irish do not differ from White Irish respondents in reported discrimination in any domain; the workplace, seeking work, or in relation to public services.

Irish Travellers and Roma are multiple times more likely than the White Irish group to experience discrimination in accessing housing, seeking work, access to health services. Traveller and Roma people are recognised as an ethnic minority in Ireland since 2017, and as amongst the most disadvantaged groups likely to be at risk of poverty and disadvantage. The Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) has noted that 80% of Roma interviewed are at risk of poverty compared with an EU average of 17%. The Inclusion Strategy consultation process found that while Traveller and Roma men experience inequality in Irish society, Traveller and Roma women most acutely experience discrimination. Key areas of disadvantage for women were the impact of existing policies on maternal health, on women experiencing gender-based violence and women living in poverty.

Asylum seekers in Ireland are a particularly discriminated against minority, forced to live in accommodation run for private profit, that lacks privacy for individuals or appropriate for space for families and often lacking in facilities for independent cooking and cleaning. These *Direct Provision Centres* were stated to be only temporary but have become long-term accommodation for many and violate sets of human rights in relation to mental health, privacy, right to work and engage in community life. Until early 2018, those in *Direct Provision* have not been allowed to work and paid only a small weekly stipend to cover essential personal purchases. Even when given leave to remain or granted refugee status, accessing independent accommodation is extremely difficult. In a housing crisis that sees rental costs soaring and social housing waiting lists growing, those without savings, work or family connections are at grave risk of homelessness. Many of those granted residency rights cannot leave *Direct Provision* because rental levels in the private market sector are far too high.

Overview of Legislative Change and Public Discourse

There has been some significant change to the institutional structures for gender equality over recent years in Ireland that impact directly on gender equality. Gender equality is not mentioned in the Irish Constitution, there is no anti-discrimination clause and there is no recognition of fathers in the Constitution. On the contrary, two provisions in the Constitution (Articles 41.2.1 and 41.2.2) recognise only a narrow, limiting role for women in the home and as mothers.

Article 41 fails women, as it does not encompass the reality and diversity of women's lives. The highly gendered language fails men by not recognising their work as carers, or the duties and responsibilities men have to be carers. Furthermore by only referencing care in the home, it also fails society by not recognising the different types of care, in the community as well as with family members and friends. (NWC1 2020)

Gender equality legislation was introduced in the 1970s after Ireland first became a member of the European Economic Community (EEC). The introduction of broader equality legislation together with new equality infrastructure in the 2000s brought in protection against discrimination on nine grounds (including gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion, membership of the Traveller Community, family status and ethnicity) in both employment and access to services. A Gender Recognition Act was introduced in 2015 providing for the issuing of passports to transgender people based on self-declaration of 'preferred gender' for those over 18 years.

Institutional systems for gender equality are currently centred on the Gender Equality Unit in the DJE and the independent Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC). A new development with the establishment of IHREC is the *positive duty obligation* placed on the public sector requiring public bodies to *have regard* to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and protect the human rights of its employees and service users. The proposed Gender Pay Gap Information Bill 2019 was seen as another step in the process of implementing this positive duty ethos with respect to gender equality in that it would have required private companies to gather gender specific data in relation to pay. The Bill fell with the dissolution of government in January 2020.

Powerful popular campaigns in Ireland generated an unstoppable demand for a referendum on the Irish Constitution, and the right to same sex marriage was confirmed by a strong majority of the popular vote in 2015. Another successful referendum campaign resulted in the foetal rights/anti-abortion clause being deleted from the Constitution. In both instances, large mobilisations were generated outside the traditional political party system and even the NGO sector. In the case of abortion, decades of campaigning by women and women's groups supported by civil society organisations and trade unions generated powerful alliances and resulted in huge victories for women's reproductive rights and justice in Ireland. Multiple court cases putting individual women on trial organising and campaigning by feminist and women's organisations, lawyers, doctors, trade unions, LGBT and community organisations, political parties, international organisations of solidarity, all culminated in a *Together for Yes Campaign* that succeeded in repealing the anti-abortion clause (8th Amendment). CSW and UN Human Rights Commission played a hugely important role in highlighting the human rights of women to access abortion in Ireland.

Few anticipated the strength of the *yes vote*, which spanned all ages, urban and rural areas, women and men, working class and middle class areas and crossed most of the political parties. But it was the stories of individual women, and the organisations that supported them, that became too powerful to silence in a vote that commentators have acknowledged has been a vote for women's choices and women's deci-

sions. Advocates welcomed the result as an historic advance in women's reproductive rights in Ireland. While this new legislation represents an enormous step forward, the struggle for reproductive justice continues in Ireland. A critical gender policy debate through 2018-2019 has remained the issue of women's health, reproductive rights and justice and the process of implementation of the law on abortion. Following the success of the same sex marriage referendum, the need to recognise in legislation the diverse family types that exist in contemporary Ireland was highlighted. Same-sex couples are now able to register both their names on their child's birth certificate. Significant changes are still needed to be brought into practice particularly in relation to the rights of a child born through donor assisted human reproduction and to provide a framework for both parents in same sex relationships to have a legal relationship to the child/ren they are rearing. It is anticipated that donor anonymity will no longer be allowed and children will have access to their full genetic history once they reach the age of 18 as the amendments also provide for the inclusion of all donor details on the National Donor-Conceived Person Register.

A key role in this process of social and cultural change was played by an innovative form of deliberative democracy that preceded the referendum. The government set up *Citizens' Assemblies* – 99 randomly selected citizens and an appointed chairperson – to address the issues, to explore legislative and policy changes and reach a majority view on constitutional change. After a period of slow, hesitant and cumbersome social change, this process helped to accelerate change. A new 2020 *Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality* has now been set up to explore legislative and policy changes on a range of gender issues, including the care penalty, economic independence, the gender earnings gap, low pay, gender stereotyping and representation.

Ireland's National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020: *Creating a Better Society for All* in May 2017 (DJE, 2017) was launched by DJE in 2017 with its stated intention to work towards equality for women by 2021 by responding to women's needs across a diversity of identities and situations. It focuses on the needs of working women by proposing to continue to increase investment in childcare, to take action to tackle the gender pay gap, to improve the conditions of women

in precarious employment, and to provide additional help to women entrepreneurs. Furthermore, lone parents and socially excluded women will, it is stated, have improved access to education, training and employment opportunities. The strategy's stated plan is to implement a policy framework that will focus on the following outcomes – that women and girls in Ireland should: enjoy economic security and equal socio-economic opportunity with men and boys; experience improved physical and mental health; exercise equal and active citizenship; participate equally in leadership in all areas of Irish life; experience a reduction in gender-based violence; and that a gender perspective is taken into account by the machinery of government. However, it is largely an aspirational document with few specific targets, timescales and additional resources allocated to its implementation.

A commitment to budgetary equality proofing, when fully and effectively implemented, should result in a process towards greater measured development in gender equality policies. Until recently, there was no attempt in economic and social policies to create a balanced commitment to gender equality (Murphy 2016). The Strategy includes an action to build capacity within the civil and public service on gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting and introduces a responsibility on all Government Departments to gender proof new policies and review existing policies in relation to gender equality. This has the potential to impact significantly on gender culture throughout the government and wider society – but only if effectively implemented.

Conclusion

Ireland has serious problems with undervaluing care, gendered poverty and inequalities that require significant structural changes. Access to paid work is deeply impacted by the restrictions placed on women by competing issues of care and economic independence. Poor care infrastructure compounds this situation (Barry and Feeley, 2016; IHREC 2019). In the context of Beijing Declaration +25 and the 2020 Commission on the Status of Women, feminists, women's organisations, progressive parties and actors should focus demands on the Irish government to better realise and implement the *Beijing Platform for Action*.

Economic and social policy has failed to address poverty and inequality and to put in place the vital social investment needed in the face of unacceptable levels of homelessness, poor access to health services, incomes on or below the poverty line - and this includes many of those (one in six) in low paid employment. The *recovery* in Ireland is partial and has not benefited significant sectors of society. There are many that are trapped in persistent poverty, in the absence of effective government intervention. Women are particularly affected by the rising costs of housing and childcare, along with low pay levels for part-time precarious employment. Measures to address some of these issues have been taken but the State still has a long way to go in creating pathways to decent, sustainable employment that allows households to combine paid work and quality care. What emerged from the latest General Election in February 2020 is that sustainable housing, health, childcare and public transport are the critical issues in post-recession Ireland, marked by a clear shift in voting towards parties and candidates that recognise these priorities, and the urgent need for a social investment programme that would provide such critical services.

It is vital that issues of gendered inequality play a central role in

informing public policy making and while the Citizens' Assembly is a welcome development, women continue to be chronically under-represented in decision-making in Ireland – and that is reflected in a lack of a gender lens in policy-making. In Ireland, adopting effective gender-informed targets aimed at reducing poverty and inequality among vulnerable groups such as low-income households, children, lone parents, minorities, homeless is both urgent and critical. Social and economic impact assessments are needed prior to implementing proposed policy measures that impact on the income and public services that many low-income households depend on. Specific needs of discriminated against minorities need to be prioritised and the situation of women within these groups addressed: the homeless; lone parents; those subject to GBV; ethnic minorities (including Traveller and Roma); low-income households (including working poor); people with disabilities; sexual minorities; those in Direct Provision.

What is clearly missing from Irish public policy are much more specific targets and clear timeframes to be set down linked to effective strategies to achieve much needed economic social and economic change. The commitment from Government to introduce equality and gender budgeting needs to be implemented and followed by the delivery of real equality outcomes through targeted budget measures for women and other disadvantaged groups. This approach has the capacity to ensure all members of society have sufficient resources and incomes to live life with dignity. There needs to be a system of accountability for gender equality, linked to budgets, very specific policies, lines of responsibility and timelines – aspirational documents are not enough. The widespread adoption of the Living Wage has the potential to make a critical difference to those living in poverty and low paid workers and would begin to establish a minimum, but more decent, standard of living (as well as moving Ireland towards introducing a basic income system). Legal protections and strong supports are needed for those in precarious and low paid employment, low income and lone parent households through urgent public housing, childcare and health provision, together with a more gender equal redistribution of care and incomes within and between households.

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ANNEX:

Consequences of austerity – selected data on poverty and inequality in Ireland

Pre- and post-crisis

AT RISK OF POVERTY RATE

14.1% in 2008 increased to 17.3% in 2012 and reduced to 14.0% in 2018
2008: Women 14.9% Men 14.0% 2018: Women 14.9% Men 13.0%

PERCENTAGE OF IRISH PEOPLE LIVING IN CONSISTENT POVERTY

4.2% in 2008 increased to 9.1% in 2013 and reduced to 5.6% in 2017
2008: Women 4.5% Men: 4.0% 2018: Women 6.2% Men 5.1%

MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

13.7% in 2008 increased to 30.5% in 2013 and reduced to 15.1% in 2017.
2018: Women 15.6% Men 14.7%

GROUPS MOST AT RISK OF POVERTY

2018: Lone parents 33.5%; Unemployed 47.3%; Ill or disabled 47.7%

CONSISTENT POVERTY RATE FOR THE UNEMPLOYED

9.7% in 2008 increased to 27.6% in 2018

CHILDREN LIVING POVERTY IN CONSISTENT POVERTY

2018: 23.9% Consistent poverty 8.8%

CONSISTENT POVERTY IN LONE PARENT HOUSEHOLDS (OVER 90% WOMEN)

17.8% in 2008 increased to 19.2% in 2018.

AT RISK OF POVERTY OF THOSE ENGAGED IN HOME DUTIES (98% WOMEN)

2008 21.7% increased to 23.2% in 2018:

2018 Consistent poverty of those engaged on home duties 8.4%

EMPLOYMENT RATE OF WOMEN AND MEN AGED 16-64

2008: women 60.5% men 75.6%

2013: women 57.1% men 65.8%

2019: women 67.0% men 80.2%

GENDER PAY GAP

2008: 12.6pp 2012: 14.4pp 2017: 14.7pp

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE OF WOMEN AND MEN AGED 16-74

2008: women 3.9% men 6.2% 2013: women 11.4% men 15.9%

2019: women 5.2% men 5.6%

2008: Gender gap 2.3pp 2013: gender gap 4.5pp 2019 gender gap 0.4pp

GINI CO-EFFICIENT MEASURE OF INCOME INEQUALITY

Ireland 30.6

WOMEN WITH THIRD LEVEL EDUCATION

aged 25-64 (with a degree) earn 28% less than their male counterparts.

WHO DOES THE HOUSEWORK?

2017: Women carry out 40% more housework than men.

Social Transfers (e.g. state pensions, child benefit, Jobseekers and other social welfare payments) are very effective tools for reducing poverty. In 2018, if all social transfers were excluded from income, the at risk of poverty rate would have been 40.9%.

Gender – women are generally at higher risk of poverty than men as they are less likely to be in paid employment, tend to have lower pensions, are more involved in unpaid caring responsibilities and when they are in work, are frequently paid less.

Biography

Ursula Barry is Associate Professor at University College Dublin, Ireland specialising in gender, equality and public policy. Irish representative on the EU Expert Network on Gender Equality (SAAGE.eu). Member of Expert Advisory Group on Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality in Ireland. Author of Gendered Austerity Policies: inequality on the rise in the EU, in *Global Women's Work* (eds) English et al Routledge 2019; *Gender equality and economic crisis: Ireland and the EU in Economics & Austerity in Europe* (eds) Bargawani et al Routledge 2017. ursula.barry@ucd.ie

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POST-RECESSION IRELAND?

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LAYOUT / GRAPHIC

Erifili Arapoglou

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