

Statement to the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality, September 26th, 2018.

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Let me begin by thanking the committee for the invitation to the ESRI to appear today. I am Helen Russell, Deputy Head of the social research division at the institute, and I am joined by my colleague, Dr Frances McGinnity. Together we lead research on equality at the Institute.

In our submission we will highlight a number of ESRI studies, which shed light on gender roles and the distribution of paid work and care in Irish society, and how these have changed over time. The evidence shows that there is a clear mismatch between the role of women as framed in the Constitution and the reality of women's lives in the twenty-first century.

The role of the Institute is to provide an evidence-base for policy, rather than to advocate for a particular position and it is in that capacity that we appear before the committee. Our research highlights the need to assess the impact of current and future policy and legislation on gender inequalities in paid and unpaid work. It also reveals some of the complexities in the definition of care and unpaid work that would need to be addressed in the case of replacement wording.

We focus on three issues

- how the role of women in Ireland in paid employment has changed
- the measurement and distribution of care and unpaid work
- and the nature of policy support for combining paid work and caring for young children in comparative perspective

1. The changing position of women in the Irish labour market

In a recent overview we document women's changing position in the labour market over 50 years.¹ Census figures for the early years of the State show very low levels of female employment, especially among married women, although these figures undercounted women's work on family farms and their participation in part-time employment. Women's employment increased gradually over the 60s, 70s and 80s as a number of barriers were successively removed, such as the marriage bar and the introduction of equal pay legislation. Women's educational qualifications also increased, so that by 1995 young women's entry into third level education surpassed that of men's for the first time.²

The pace of change in women's employment accelerated even further in the 1990s and 2000s. This period encompassed both significant policy development (such as extensions to maternity leave, the introduction of parental leave, and the move towards more individualisation of the tax system) and an upsurge in demand for labour during the Celtic Tiger.

Women responded to these changes in the policy and labour market context with a large and swift movement into the labour market. The employment rate of women rose from 36 per cent in 1990 to 60 per cent in 2016. Even during the recession, female participation in the labour market remained at a high level though there was an increase in involuntary part-time work and unemployment. While the gender gap in employment rates has narrowed considerably, gender differences persist in pay and the hours of work, with one third of women working part-time, compared to 13 per cent of men. The gender pay gap has stuck at around 15%. In both cases, gender inequalities in care and domestic work play a role, for example with time out of the labour market for caring contributing to gender pay disparities.

The increase in employment and labour market participation of women has been widespread across the population, including among the mothers of young children. In the Growing Up in Ireland Study we find that just over half of mothers are in employment when the child turns three, and almost 60 per cent by the time the child is aged 5. Though OECD figures show that the rate of employment among mothers of pre-school and school-age children in Ireland is below the OECD average (Figure 1).

This evidence suggests that many women do enter employment when afforded the opportunity, though significant gender differences persist in the Irish labour market.

¹ Russell, H., McGinnity, F. & O'Connell (2017) Gender Equality in the Irish Labour Market 1966-2016: Unfinished Business? *Economic and Social Review*, Vol. 48, No. 4. pp 393-418

² ESRI School Leavers Surveys.

2. The gender division of caring and unpaid work

Has there been a corresponding shift in men and women's involvement in unpaid work? Is this what some have called "Stalled revolution"? In other words, that women's changing role in the labour market has not been matched by a similar shift in men's role in the home. There is significantly less information on this side of the equation reflecting the lack of visibility and under-valuing of care work.

One of the first issues to be considered is how broadly unpaid or non-market work should be defined. From a gender equality perspective, the distribution of domestic work such as cooking and housework is extremely important and therefore in our research, and indeed the international literature on gender equality we include this alongside caring. This definitional issue would have to be considered in any replacement of Article 41.2.

Time-use surveys are seen as the gold standard for measuring non-market work. In Ireland there has been only one, which we carried out at the ESRI in 2005 with support from the Department of Justice and Equality. The survey showed that the quantity of this work is very substantial indeed and that its distribution is strongly gendered. On average women did 4 hours 56 minutes of unpaid work per day, while men did 1 hour 54 minutes per day.³ Within this, women spent an average of two and a half hours per day on care, and men spent 39 minutes. This includes both care for adults and children, though a much greater proportion of the population were caring for children than adults. When combined with paid work (and commuting) women were working on average 40 minutes longer per day than men.

Comparison of time-use data across Europe show that Irish women spend a considerably higher amount on time on these activities than women in the OECD countries.⁴

Data on the distribution of care work from a European wide survey allows for some comparison over time. It shows that in 2016, 44 per cent of women and 25 per cent of men in Ireland were involved in care work on a daily basis. These figures were virtually unchanged since 2003.⁵ The survey suggests

³ McGinnity, F. and Russell, H. (2008) *Gender Inequalities in Time Use: The Distribution of Caring, Housework and Employment Among Women and Men in Ireland*. Dublin: Equality Authority/ESRI.

⁴ OECD Gender Data Portal based on the OECD Time-Use database: www.oecd.org/gender/data.

⁵ These figures come from the European Quality of Life Survey, which been carried out every four years since 2003. Analysis of this survey forms part of a forthcoming study on care work as part of an ESRI and IHREC programme of research.

that gender difference in participation in housework in Ireland declined over the same period though the gap remains wide.⁶

This research highlights the scale of care and unpaid work and the importance of the making visible and valuing these activities from a gender equality perspective. One step towards highlighting unpaid work is to measure it regularly, by collecting time-use surveys like other countries do. This would allow for an economic valuation of care work.

3. How do policy supports for combining work and care in Ireland compare to elsewhere in Europe?

In this section we focus on supports for those with childcare responsibilities, as this is where our research has centred.

Childcare

Historically there has been a very low level of state investment in childcare in Ireland and the system is largely market based with a high level of private provision combined with community provision but no direct state provision. Investment and policy development was in part curtailed by political ambiguity about the merits of supporting mothers to enter employment and argument that policy should be neutral as regards providing support for mothers caring for children in the home and those combining care and employment. “Childcare support” was defined in successive governments as cash benefits to parents - either child benefit or for a brief period the Early Childcare Supplement - with few supports to address the cost, quality or supply of childcare.

There has been a significant increase in investment in childcare over the last decade, including the introduction of the ECCE and the affordable childcare scheme, which represent a clear shift in policy intent and focus. Nevertheless families face a high burden of costs. OECD research shows that the cost for formal childcare for pre-school children in Ireland was second highest for lone parents and third highest for couple households in OECD countries. Our own study showed that parents are paying an average of 12% of disposable household income for childcare costs of one three year old child⁷. The study also clearly demonstrated that the amount mothers pay for childcare affects how much paid employment they do, and that higher costs are associated with a subsequent reduction in women’s paid work hours. The response to childcare costs was strongest in low-income families.

⁶ In 2016 88% of women were involved in these tasks on a daily basis compared to 47% of men, a ratio of 1.85 to 1, In 2003 the ratio was 2 to 1.

⁷ Russell, H., McGinnity, F., Fahey, É. and Kenny, O. (2018) *Maternal employment and the cost of childcare In Ireland*. Research Series No. 73. Dublin: ESRI.

A further finding of the study was the considerable involvement of relatives, particularly grandparents in providing care for pre-school children in Ireland. At three years of age 23 per cent of children that were in non-parental care were being looked after by a relative. In 55 per cent of cases the relative was unpaid but in 45 per cent of cases this was paid care. This highlights the blurred boundaries between care inside/outside the home and paid versus unpaid caring.

Parental leave and maternity leave

Family leave linked to the birth of a child has an important role to play in facilitating time for parents to care for young children.⁸ Provision for parents takes the form of maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave.

Mothers' employment patterns in the early years are very sensitive to the length of paid leave. The duration of maternity leave – 26 weeks paid leave and 16 weeks unpaid leave – now compares reasonably well to other European countries, though the relatively low maximum threshold means that the replacement rate for maternity benefit in Ireland falls well below the level found in a number of comparable EU countries.⁹ Parental leave for both parents has been extended to 18 weeks per child but is unpaid; fathers' entitlement to paid leave is confined to two weeks of paternity leave.

Across Europe there has been a trend towards a blurring of the differences between maternity, paternity and parental leaves, and when the amount and value of paid leave are combined, Ireland falls in the lowest of three groups of 43 countries, and well below the highest performing countries.

The comparative evidence suggests that where fathers take parental leave this can lead to greater sharing of care for children by gender, and that take-up for fathers is strongly related to payment. Take-up of unpaid parental leave is very low among fathers in Ireland.¹⁰

This evidence suggests that combining work and caring of young children remains challenging and there still significant gaps in supports in Ireland.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research we have drawn on highlights the very significant changes in gender roles in Ireland but also the continued relevance of gender inequalities in the public and private sphere.

⁸ OECD (2007) *Babies and Bosses: Reconciling Work and Family Life. A Synthesis of Findings for OECD countries*. Paris: OECD.

⁹ Blum, S., Koslowski, A., Macht, A. and Moss, P. (2018). *International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research 2018*. International Network on Leave Policies and Research.

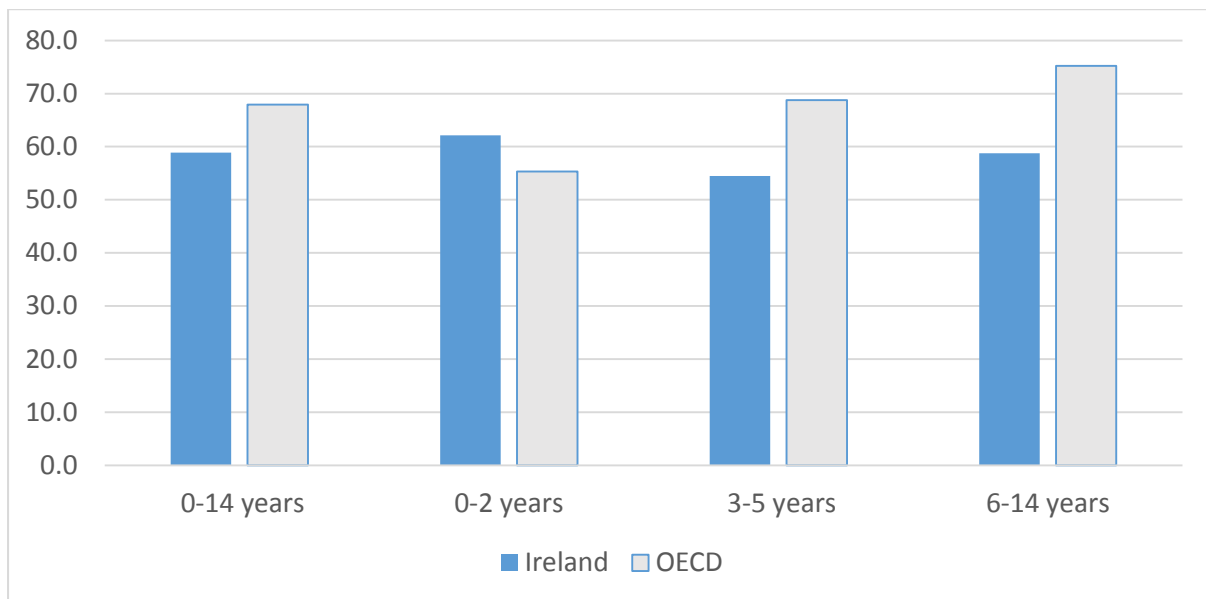
¹⁰ By 9 months, around 12% of fathers who responded in the *Growing Up in Ireland* study had taken parental leave, and the majority (74%) of those who did take leave took 2 weeks or less.

Care and unpaid work have been consistently under-valued, yet the scale of this endeavour is substantial.

The removal the outdated gender stereotyping contained in Article 41.2 is an important symbolic move in terms of gender equality, a point which is recognised by a wide range of bodies including the Department of Justice, IHREC, NWCI, as well as international agencies such as the UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. The research does not speak directly to whether or not this should be replaced by another form of text. It does highlight a small part of the complexity that faces individuals and families in balancing paid work, housework and care needs, which change over their life-course. It also presents some of the issues that are involved in defining care and non-market work that would arise in the framing and interpretation of alternative wording.

Our research also underlines the importance of a series of incremental legislative and policy changes that aimed to remove barriers to women's entry to the labour market and consequently to reduce gender inequalities in employment and in access to resources. These supports remain necessary so that women can exercise their right to equal participation in public life, while at the same time contributions to care work are recognised and valued.

Figure 1: Maternal Employment Rates by Age of Youngest Child, 2013



Source: OECD 2015.