



## Opening Statement to the Committee on Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth

**National Women's Council- Jennifer McCarthy Flynn, Head of Policy**

**An Cosán- Heydi Foster Breslin, CEO, An Cosán**

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Good morning. A Chathaoirleach and members of the committee, The National Women's Council welcomes the invitation to speak to you today and we are very pleased to share this opportunity with our member An Cosán. As a 190-member organisation, our members are the National Women's Council.

A child's poverty is the poverty of her family, her household and her community. One parent families continue to be the group most at risk of poverty in Ireland today. Research from the ESRI shows that lone parents and their children experienced persistent levels of poverty during boom, recession and the early stages of economic recovery.<sup>1</sup>

In 2019, 17% of one parent families lived in consistent poverty and 45% were experiencing enforced deprivation.<sup>2</sup> With 86% of lone parents being women, at the most at risk of poverty, homelessness and exclusion in Ireland, child poverty is highly gendered and a significant gender equality issue.

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<sup>1</sup> ESRI (2018) Poverty dynamics of social risk groups in the EU: an analysis of the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, 2005 to 2014. <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2018-01/BKMNEXT345.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> CSO (2020) Survey of Income and Living Conditions <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2018/>

As recognised by National Strategy for Women and Girls:2017-2021 Supporting and resourcing the women's community development sector is a key means to provide services and support for socially excluded women. An Cosán's "one generation solution to poverty," is a recognised and highly regarded women's community development & education model of wrap around support and intervention.

### **An Cosán - Statement regarding Child Poverty**

**(NWC will deliver this statement on behalf of An Cosán as requested by the Committee)**

It has been said that 'the true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members'.

One of the most vulnerable groups in our society is lone-parent families.

Social exclusion, deprivation, a stifling lack of opportunity, exposure to the harsh effects of economic fragility - and the impact of all this on a person's mental health - can press down on even the most resilient, let alone the little ones setting out in life from this challenging start point.

For 35 years An Cosán has been providing a path to a better future for women and children in West Tallaght, working towards those better outcomes with the families we serve.

We passionately believe in the transformative power of education to change a person's path in life.

We know well that if you educate a mother, you empower her whole family to value and appreciate the benefits of education.

For the women using our services, education is their hope. It is their chance to build a sustainable and equitable future for themselves and their children.

For our little ones starting out in life, we use all the expertise and resources we have to help them develop in the first three years of their learning journey.

We use best-in-class learning and development practice to help them make their first steps in the world from a more equitable place.

If it's not available at home, then it is when they are with us.

The pandemic has evidenced this in a stark light.

When COVID-19 struck all the cracks that we knew existed in our society, the ones we had been fighting to overcome, were suddenly laid bare for all to see.

We knew immediately this would disproportionately impact those furthest behind first and hit the most marginalised in our communities the hardest.

COVID has magnified the inequality in our society and those most affected are women.

Time and again studies and reports reveal the extra burden that women have had to bear in this pandemic and in particular those in low-income households.

We cannot, and will not, forget that fact.

Community education's roots in Ireland can be traced back to the idea of "no classes without crèches" and the emancipation goals of the women's movement in the late 70's and early 80's.

At An Cosán, we know that integrated support services for children and families are critical to address the intersectional nature of poverty.

Integrating early years education and care and family supports is the best way to alleviate poverty, especially for children.

Intergenerational education breaks the insidious cycle of poverty.

That's our aspiration for our 'One-Generation-Solution'.

We know that if we can raise a woman up through education her family can escape poverty forever. In just one generation we can and do break the cycle.

An Cosán runs three centres for children in Tallaght West and a further four in Cabra and Whitehall providing early years care for over 200 children every day.

Sadly, we are unable to cater for the demand and our waiting lists are stretching ever longer.

We know this means there are many, many families and children who cannot access or avail of these vital services.

Children have missed accessing crucial services such as assessment for special needs.

Our learners battle to stay engaged in classes and progress their education while caring for their families.

Vital opportunities for early intervention on development issues are missed.

Mothers struggle to cope.

This is not just an An Cosán issue, or a Tallaght West or Cabra issue.

The need for integrated services exists right across the country... and across our society. But it is at its most urgent in communities where poverty is most deeply concentrated.

In An Cosán our early years professionals, counsellors, family support workers and educators provide courses in adult education, higher education, literacy, and digital skills.

We know all women and children have a right to equity of opportunity in a wealthy, civilised society.

We have seen over the past four decades how, as a society, we all face the same storms. We all face recessions, financial crisis and now a pandemic. But let us be in no doubt - we are not all in the same boat.

Some of us have many advantages, whatever the weather. Others are struggling to hold on for dear life even in normal times.

Equity of access to education is key to tackling intergenerational child poverty.

Equity means those furthest behind being able to access the highest quality education – from early years to lifelong learning and development.

Every woman in Ireland deserves the right to be able to access community education.

Every child in Ireland deserves a right to benefit from a start in life which includes

- a warm, caring environment
- a high-quality curriculum delivered by well-trained professionals
- a range of qualified supports to promote child development
- scaffolding to help children regulate their behaviour and life stage transitions
- as well as a humble love of learning.

This is the measure of treating our most vulnerable that we can all be proud of. It shifts the odds in their favour and delivers a One-Generation-Solution to poverty.

Thank you.

**ENDS**