



Women's  
Collective  
Ireland

### “Women Inspiring Women - Stronger Together”

We would like to thank the Chair and members for the invitation to join them today to discuss “Challenges facing women accessing education, leadership & political roles”. Women’s Collective Ireland is a national women’s community development organisation advancing marginalised women’s equality through women’s community education. We represent and work directly with women experiencing disadvantage, through our 17 Grassroots Women’s Community Projects, based in urban and rural communities throughout Ireland. Our input on this topic will be in the context of grassroots women we work with.

WCI utilises women’s community education as a vital tool in tackling educational disadvantage for women as it provides a model of education, from first steps to third level, which encompasses the needs of women. It starts with the lived experience of the participants and validates their experiences and knowledge. We recognise that adequate supports must be contained within community education programmes to ensure access for the most marginalised of women. We also recognise the need for a greater focus on integrating diverse women on the basis of areas of commonality rather than nationality or legal status. Integration should also include other minority communities such as women with disabilities, Traveller women, female lone parents and lesbian and bisexual women.

In our experience, barriers to access include:

- Lack of adequate funding and lack of recognition in policy and decision-making arenas of the education and training needs of women
- Lack of recognition that engagement is a longer process for marginalised women and the need for targeted supports, including free childcare, mentoring, educational and IT equipment and specific needs-based supports.
- Childcare and social care responsibilities are a real and consistent barrier to women’s participation in education and need to be recognised as a fundamental issue in the delivery of community education.
- WCI urge that sustainable budgets for education programmes include the payment of social care allowances and out-of pocket expenses to students undertaking community education modules. Flexibility in funding the delivery of community education courses is essential and this should include the ability to repay the travel and social care costs for students that are excluded from education by those financial barriers
- WCI see insufficient access points for entry pathways and progression routes are weak. Starting point can become staying point. Non-traditional students do not easily merge into the traditional pathways of education. WCI champions educational progression routes for women & access to 3<sup>rd</sup> level.
- Ireland still has low literacy levels, and the Digital divide is causing barriers. The costs and speed of technology is changing leaving many behind.

In relation to women accessing leadership roles WCI would like to emphasize that grassroots women are very active and visible at local level and contribute to civil society but they are not getting beyond representation on the local school boards and community group volunteering roles. This is becoming a stagnant route. No next steps outside of local level activism.

The six Cs' – cash, childcare, confidence, culture, candidate selection procedures and cyber are well documented as barriers for women. Women we work with have highlighted fear and imposter syndrome when considering leadership roles - “Not many people with my accent there”, Not belonging, “Can't do public speaking”.

Supporting women's access includes:

- Gender mainstreaming - incorporate gender considerations into all policies, programmes, practices and decision making thus enable community organisations to deliver community programmes advancing women's leadership.
- Ensuring political parties run women candidates in a meaningful, serious and supportive way and do not engage in 'tokenism'.
- Ensuring the taskforce on keeping women in politics safe has input from civil society actors and organisations, particularly those with expertise in gender equality, diversity and inclusion, law and violence against women.
- The taskforce should not only consider women currently occupying elected roles but be expanded to include women in activism and those not yet in political spaces who may wish to run in future elections.
- Funding for organisations working with women on the ground in the area of leadership and representation.

WCI and many of its Projects have been engaging in work to promote women's leadership and representation through:

- Voter participation programmes
- Delivering a Women's Leadership Programme in 17 projects to over 200 grassroots women across the country from **participation to politics**; including empowering activities, to understanding public civic society and taking action and representation roles.
- WCI collaborating with other organisations to work towards our collective goals.
- Currently women around the country are feeding into and updating our WCI Manifesto naming the issues that affect grassroots women to share this with the politicians.

Community and feminist education enhances critical consciousness, awareness of power relations and increases social and political knowledge. We ask that these programmes are funded. WCI shares a collective vision for an island of well-educated society not just those who can easily afford it. This small country to have the best educated population would be hugely productive for the family, community, the economy, leading to challenges to inequalities. We recognise the need for policy to be developed to progress education for grassroots women in all their diversity. WCI is calling on government to implement sustainable funding ensuring continuity of high quality, outcome focused community education with women which will allow for the unique and flexible education and training programmes.

**The topics we discussed today are not** challenges for women, but the challenge is for the State and society to do better.

Thank you for the opportunity for WCI to be heard today.