

**National Women's Council opening statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee
Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth**

"Challenges facing women accessing education, leadership and political roles".

Opening statement of Rachel Coyle, Head of Campaigns and Mobilisation

13th June 2022 at 3pm

Committee Room 2, LH2000, Leinster House

Chairperson and members of the Committee,

We thank you for the invitation here today for this discussion on 'Challenges facing women accessing education, leadership and political roles.'

The National Women's Council is the leading national representative organisation for women and women's groups in Ireland. Celebrating 50 years since our foundation in 1973, NWC is a membership organisation with over 190 member groups across Ireland. The ambition of the National Women's Council is an Ireland where every woman enjoys true equality, and no woman is left behind. This ambition cannot be fully realised until there is equal representation of women in public and political life.

NWC reminds the Committee that in taking the following challenges into consideration that women's experiences are wholly diverse. Additional factors such as membership of the traveller community or other ethnic minority communities, income, education, disabled women, migrant women, LGBTQ+ identity and women in rural communities all intersect with gender as these women face additional barriers in achieving full and equal participation.

In our statement we will address the structural and societal challenges and barriers that prevent women from achieving true equality. None of which exist in isolation but challenge women concurrently in accessing opportunities for education, leadership, and political roles. We would also welcome the opportunity to highlight what measures can be taken to address these challenges.

To begin, NWC warmly welcomes the announcement earlier this year of a referendum on care, gender equality and the family will be held in November 2023. The referendum is necessary to remove the outdated and sexist language of article 41.2 of the constitution. A provision which as noted by CEDAW is one that continues to 'perpetuates traditional stereotypical views of the social roles and responsibilities of women...in the family and in society at large'.¹ The legacy of this legislation has had far reaching effects on women in Irish society, resulting in sexist views of women and the limiting of women's role and ambition.

Despite huge changes in women's participation in paid work over previous decades, this culture has allowed women to continue to bear the greater responsibility for unpaid care. This implied discrimination is a major contribution to the challenges facing women's access to education, leadership and political roles. The stereotyping of women as solely wives and mothers has led to a culture where women's ambitions are hampered by the perception that they are stepping beyond the appropriate scope of a societally assigned role.

Research indicates that 45% of women and 29% of men provide care for others on a day-to-day basis. Women who provide childcare carry out an average of 43 hours per week and men, 25 hours. When the hours spent on paid employment are

¹ CEDAW/C/IRL/CO/6-7, para 1o.

accounted for, women still carry out more hours of care than men per week.² Of those whose main activity is looking after home and family, nearly all (94.3%) are women.³ The pandemic reinforced gendered patterns of care - women undertook more care for family or friends and women were more likely to report childcare issues or difficulty working from home because of family responsibilities.⁴

Caring responsibilities continue to be a key barrier for people considering entering and remaining in politics. This doesn't simply affect women but councillors we have engaged with tell us they feel they have a "triple shift" – they do their paid work, they do the caring for children or other family members, and their political office work.⁵

Still, in 2022, women are being forced to choose between their career in public office and their family commitments. This particularly affects women from already disadvantaged groups. Traveller women are more likely to shoulder caring responsibilities, migrant women may not have access to family support networks, and lone parents may not have the support of a partner. The lack of representation for these groups can mean crucial decisions which affect their lives are being made without them. We need to see family-friendly practices encouraged in our local government which supports women in taking up seats as councillors is local government and supporting them in maintaining these seats when elected.

We must do more to ensure our educational and political institutions are attractive to women and those with additional needs. We ask the members of the committee to

² Russell, H., Grotti, R., McGinnity, F. & Privalko, I. (2019). Caring and Unpaid Work in Ireland. IHREC & ESRI

³ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-wamii/womenandmeninireland2019/work/>

⁴ CSO (2020). The Employment and Life effects of COVID-19 survey.

⁵ Doody, Sinéad. 2022. 'A Toolkit for Local Authorities on Supporting Family-Friendly Local Government'. Report for the National Women's Council [A Toolkit for Local Authorities on Supporting Family-Friendly Local Government » Publications » The National Women's Council of Ireland \(nwcsi.ie\)](#)

take into consideration our Toolkit for Local Authorities on Supporting Family-Friendly Local Government. This toolkit includes a 10-step plan for embedding family-friendly practices, including the development of parental supports such as maternity leave and childcare.

Income disparity exacerbated by the soaring cost of living and poverty are a barrier to women's participation in education and public life. Almost half of women earn less than €20,000.⁶

Lone parent households, 86% of whom are headed by women, are three times more likely to be pushed into consistent poverty than the general population and 1 in 4 lone parents report that they are in arrears on utility bills.⁷

People with disabilities and those unable to work due to long-standing health problems continue to be at a much higher risk of poverty.⁸ Among Traveller and Roma, 31% are living in households affected by severe material deprivation.⁹

Heading to college or running for election seem very unrealistic when your primary concern is keeping food on the table and gas in the meter. The provision of adequately resourced quality public service, particularly childcare, is essential for reducing poverty and improving access to education, public participation, and decent work.

⁶ National Women's Council, 'Shaping Our Future: Tackling the cost of living for women in Budget 2023'.

[NWC_PBS_2023_Shaping_our_Future.pdf \(nwci.ie\)](#)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ CSO (2022). [SILC 2021](#).

⁹ EU Fundamental Rights Agency (2020). [Roma and Travellers in six countries](#).

Political parties are best placed to create pathways for women into elected politics and must commit to supporting women. This doesn't just mean building individual women's confidence and capacity, it requires reviewing and often overhauling internal party processes and cultures.

Online abuse of women in politics and public life is widespread and unrelenting, and acts as a major barrier for women to both enter and remain in politics. Research undertaken in the Republic of Ireland between 2020-2021 revealed that female councillors received 8 times as many abusive tweets per follower than their male colleagues.¹⁰

A study commissioned by NWC on women candidates who ran in the 2019 local elections reported cases of sexist abuse and stalking and for ethnic minority candidates, racist and sexist abuse.¹¹ Another NWC study found that 35% of women councillors have experienced sexual harassment or sexual misconduct in their political role.¹² Not only is this actively preventing women from accessing political and leadership roles, but furthermore influencing women incumbents who may refrain from future opportunities.

Finally, to ensure equal participation of women at all levels of our democracy, we must also see gender quotas extended to local and European elections. As many of

¹⁰ McGing, Claire and Lima, Valesca. (2022) 'Toolkit on Social Media Policies for Political Parties'. Dublin, Ireland. Report for the National Women's Council: [Toolkit on Social Media Policies for Political Parties » Publications » The National Women's Council of Ireland \(nwcs.ie\)](#)

¹¹ Cullen, Pauline and McGing, Claire. (2021) 'Women Beyond the Dáil: More Women in Local Government'. Dublin, Ireland. Report for the National Women's Council: [NWC Research Report WEB.pdf](#)

¹² McGing, Claire. 2021(b). 'Women Doing Things Differently'. Dublin, Ireland. Report for the National Women's Council: [Women doing politics differently - establishing caucus with women councillors.pdf \(nwcs.ie\)](#)

the committee members present will be familiar with, local government is a key pipeline for national office. Men are 49.37% of our current population yet hold 74% of local government seats. This gender balance has significant implications for candidate selection processes for general elections as a result. Without targeted action the pace of change is unacceptably slow. Whilst measures to erode the structural barriers that prevent women from entering public office and to support women as candidates are vital, these must be happening in parallel with quotas.

We are encouraged by the steps taken by this Committee to open a discussion regarding the challenges facing women accessing education, leadership, and political roles. This is central to the work of NWC in building an Ireland where no woman is left behind and we welcome this discussion on addressing these challenges and barriers.

We look forward to today's conversation and welcome the questions of Committee members.