

Opening statement from TASC to the Gender Equality Committee on Care and Social Protection, 26th May 2022

Good morning and thank you for the invitation to address the Committee. On behalf of TASC, I am delighted to speak today on issues around care and social protection.

Here I will focus on two inter-related aspects of care in Ireland which TASC research has covered in detail. How we value care work in the labour market, and how care work is allocated in Irish society between men and women given the current systems of childcare provision in particular.

The value given to care in the labour market and in monetary terms is low. It has been low for decades, and although Covid-19 measures have highlighted how reliant we are as a society on access to childcare in particular, there is still too little being done to raise the value of the sector in Ireland. Across Europe, care workers in various areas of care (be it early years, older-age or disability) tend to receive low wages, and be in precarious jobs with low levels of employment benefits. This is clearly evidenced by incomes alone. Figures vary by country, but compared to average incomes, the income of a typical care worker ranges from between 50-80% (percent) of average incomes. In Ireland, a 2021 Pobal report has shown that early child-care workers in non-managerial positions earn only €12.45 per hour on average. Similarly, a TASC report on the care economy from 2020 documents an hourly average wage of around €12.80 per hour among adult care workers and care assistants.

Care assistant and early child-care occupations serve as examples of where we need greater investment into innovative job and training models to enhance productivity and skill levels among care workers, rather than assuming an inability to promote greater productivity in face-to-face services such as these; such long-held assumptions ensure wages remain low and curtail advancement possibilities in any care economy. If we were to raise the wages, productivity, skills and job conditions in caring professions then we might also achieve another aim of further gender equality – which is to encourage more men to take up care work. Paid care work is still predominantly carried out by native and migrant women, though increasingly, by migrant women. Breaking down the segregation of women into care occupations must be a goal if we wish to value care work equally within Irish society. Studies looking at how perceptions of value in occupations change have demonstrated that gender-segregation means that men and women will tend to place greater symbolic value on occupations that are their same-sex dominated occupations. Thereby, gender segregation in the labour market begets greater normative value for women and men sorting into gendered caring careers. As such, it is essential that conditions of work for care workers are negotiated through collective bargaining to see wages rise, and further, that government subsidies be provided for in-work training possibilities that will generate productivity and skilled jobs.

The next point I wish to make is that for the care sector in Ireland to meet the future needs of a more gender egalitarian economy, there must be universal access for households

to public, high-quality childcare provision. There is a specific need for government to increase its spending on early childcare provisions, and to move from privatised care provisioning towards a fully integrated public early-years childcare and education system. Let us look at the two main schemes available in Ireland, the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE), and the National Childcare Scheme (NCS). Most spending in Ireland goes towards subsidising free pre-school childcare through Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE). In 2019, the government spent close to 0.16% of GNI* (Gross National Income) on ECCE and almost 0.08% of national income on the NCS. State funding has been on an upward trajectory over the last few years. However, at the current rate of increase we are decades off reaching the target set by UNICEF for countries to allocate 1% of national income to early-years care. The lack of appropriate levels of state investment in public early years and childcare provision has a detrimental effect on specifically women's and lone-parents' engagement in the Irish labour market, bringing further disparities in pay, savings and wealth security over a lifetime. If we take just one marker of this inequality which manifests in a pension income gap - the difference between male and female pension income – currently the gender disparity in annual pensions is estimated by Eurofound to be 29% in Ireland.

TASC would argue therefore that there is an urgent need to address these aspects of valuation in care sectors to achieve greater gender equality. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.