



Disability Federation of Ireland

**Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas
Committee on Gender Equality**

on

**Recommendations 10-12 and 14 of the Citizen's
Assembly on Gender Equality**

23rd June 2022

Good morning and many thanks to the Committee for inviting us to speak. DFI was delighted to contribute to the Citizen's Assembly deliberations last year and welcomed its thoughtful and strong recommendations, which reflected concerns disability organisations have been raising for many years.

While the focus of the Assembly was on gender equality, and we know that disabled women often face discrimination on multiple fronts, many of the recommendations we are discussing today would actually benefit *all* people with disabilities. They would also help Ireland to meet its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UN CRPD.

It is important to note that we could have a full session on any one of these four recommendations, but nevertheless we will all do our best to provide some inputs for the Committee's consideration.

As my opener, I wanted to pose a question to the Committee. The most recently published 2021 CSO SILC poverty data shows that disabled people are now *five* times more likely to live in consistent poverty than the general population. 19.2% of those unable to work due to a long-standing health problem (disability) live in consistent poverty, while the national average is 4%¹. Also, the at risk of poverty rate for this cohort for 2021 was 39.1%. This rate increased by almost 6% last year, while the overall average at risk of poverty rate declined, to 11.6%.

My question, for this Committee, and for our country, is do we believe that it is acceptable that people in Ireland, by virtue of being disabled, should be locked into poverty, a significantly lower standard of living, and the extreme stress that goes with trying to live on an insufficient weekly amount? It was very heartening for many of us that the citizens who deliberated on this did not believe so, and gave parliamentarians like yourselves a strong mandate to take action to change this deeply unfair situation.

We have seen recently how powerful our social protection system can be in protecting our society from poverty. The PUP was set at a much more adequate €350 a week, and the 2021 poverty data shows how effective that policy choice was, with the general at risk of poverty rate declining in spite of the economic upheaval caused by the pandemic. Disabled people have found this very hard to watch though, as they continue to be expected to live for the rest of their lives on a much lower Disability Allowance rate, then €203 a week, now increased to €208. 2 in 5 people

¹ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2021/povertyanddeprivation/>

who rely on this payment to live are at risk of poverty. This shows that our current social protection provision is completely inadequate.

Last year the INDECON report on the Cost of Disability documented what many disability organisations have been highlighting for decades. It concluded that people with disabilities have annual extra costs ranging from €8,700 to €12,300 - although this can reach €23,610 or more per annum for those with multiple disabilities. The basic annual income provided by Disability Allowance is €10,816. You can see that those sums don't add up!

DFI is increasingly receiving alarming emails and phone calls from disabled individuals struggling to make ends meet due to the cost of living crisis. Even though the government had the Cost of Disability report in hand for Budget 22, Disability Allowance was only increased by €5, the same as every other payment. This was an increase of 2.5%. As we know, inflation is now at 7%. I want to quote from one of the emails we received recently, as it illustrates the problem with painful eloquence. (I have sought permission from the author).

[Disability Allowance] "does not even cover essential outgoings - even when stripped back to the lowest amounts possible. I use as little fuel as possible, yet cannot pay my bills without going without food for days on end. The fuel allowance has been cut off since the second week of April, even though it is still cold at night.

It seems inhuman that our government treats the most vulnerable in society this way. Such extreme poverty amounts to social exclusion, a large 'NO ENTRY' sign on every ordinary pleasure. A €5 cup of coffee with a friend is an unaffordable expense on an already overdrawn account.

Regular and unexpected household costs set me back for months, particularly if I cannot repair things myself (like broken blinds, boiler trouble or washing machine repairs).

People need to have money in their pockets in order to get out of their homes and mix with the real world. Social isolation is not an acceptable solution to the misery of having no money to join the rest of humanity in ordinary, even inexpensive pursuits. Even with the living alone allowance, fuel allowance and household benefit I am constantly overdrawn due to the necessity to eat and keep warm, yet stay connected with friends, on such a miserable sum."

Acting on Recommendation 14 to set social protection rates above the poverty line is thus extremely urgent for disabled people. It is also important to remember that members of the Citizen's Assembly indicated they were willing to pay to support increased social welfare provision and

a more equal Ireland. 95.6% of citizens indicated that “if necessary, we are also prepared to support and pay higher taxes based on the principle of ability to pay, to make a reality of our recommendations.”

I have concentrated mostly on the social protection recommendation, both as the committee has already heard a number of inputs on care, and as I believe ILMI and DWI are likely to make strong and important contributions on this. However I would like to add some short lines on care, before I conclude.

People with disabilities are often forced to rely on others, including family members, for care and support. Many family carers step into the caring role because there are no, or insufficient, state supports available for their family member. If the state provided and properly resourced independent living options, this could remove the necessity for family carers to compensate for, and mitigate, a lack of state provision.

DFI thus considers Recommendation 10 to be extremely important. It addresses one of the most important rights for people with disabilities: the right to live independently. DFI and our members have been calling on the state to support and resource this right for decades. We were pleased that this right was so strongly supported by the Citizen’s Assembly, with a unanimous vote to recommend it. Ensuring a person is “resourced” to live independently includes providing the various services a person may require, including PA support, assistive technology, accessible public housing and transport, and an income above the poverty line, all of which we have called for over many years. We have also long supported the creation of a statutory right to home care, and are an active member of the Home Care Coalition, a group of civil society organisations advocating for this right.



DFI is about making Ireland fairer for people with disabilities.

We work to create an Ireland where everyone can thrive, where everyone is equally valued.

We do this by supporting people with disabilities and strengthening the disability movement.

There are over 120 member organisations in DFI. We also work with a growing number of other organisations that have a significant interest in people with disabilities.

DFI provides:

- Information
- Training and Support
- Networking
- Advocacy and Representation
- Research, Policy Development and Implementation
- Organisation and Management Development

Disability is a societal issue and DFI works with Government, and across all the social and economic strands and interests of society.

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