

# PUBLIC CONSULTATION - CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON GENDER EQUALITY 2020

## QUESTIONNAIRE

CA30178

Name: Early Childhood Ireland

### Theme 1: Gender norms and stereotypes

#### Gender norms and stereotypes as barriers to gender equality

Fixed ideas about what women and men should do in the home or at work are learned by girls and boys in early childhood and throughout their lives. These ideas or gender stereotypes affect their choices in school and as they enter careers and contribute to a lack of progress toward equality between women and men. This limits not only the jobs that women and men consider or are available to them, but also can exclude women and men from social roles and tasks.

- Please outline what you see as the key barriers/ obstacles and challenges to gender equality under this theme in law, policy and practice.

The existence of gender roles is a root cause of gender inequalities. The prevailing norm that women are the primary caretakers of the home and the family structures societies in a certain way. First, it keeps women outside the labour market. According to Eurostat, whilst the male activity rate<sup>1</sup> in Ireland is 84.9%, the female one corresponds to 71.9%. This way, 29.1% of Irish women of working age are neither employed nor actively looking for a job. Although this practically corresponds to the EU average, it is very far from countries that are internationally recognized by their gender equality. In Iceland for example, the female activity rate mounts to 85.1%.

Second, women inside the labour market work much more on a part-time basis compared to men. In Ireland, the female ratio is 28.5%, compared to 9.1% amongst male workers. Women also tend to favour jobs which are easier to get in and out of. The problem with those jobs is that they have limited possibilities for career progression. Third, gender roles heavily shape career choices, in a way that women are heavily concentrated in occupations that are traditionally perceived as female careers. The result is the emergence of a phenomenon called occupational segregation, that causes a certain group to be over or underrepresented in certain types of jobs. Occupational segregation is fuelled by the stereotypes that portray women as being fundamentally risk averse, not suited to leadership positions or to the hard sciences, which are generally highly paid professions.

Fourth, not only but especially in the high skilled male-dominated industries, barriers to entry and to career progression are acute. Once gender norms are ingrained in policymaking, the result is the emergence of very unequal leave policies which attribute to the mother the bulk of responsibilities for caring for a new-born. This way, laws facilitate statistical discrimination, which arises when employers have imperfect information about employees, and end up relying on stereotypes to make decisions. In other words, the legislation creates incentives for employers to give preference for hiring and promoting male workers *coeteris paribus*, as they

<sup>1</sup> Activity rate is the percentage of active persons in relation to the comparable total population. The economically active population comprises employed and unemployed persons. Here we considered people aged between 20 and 64 years old, 2018.

are much less likely to take career breaks and to reduce their workload after a child is born. Fifth, statistical discrimination is complemented by “pure discrimination” whereby women are believed to be less capable than men at work.

There are many barriers to tackling gender norms in Ireland. As the leading early years organisation in the country, Early Childcare Ireland draws attention to the government’s neglect of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector. Policymakers worldwide should not underestimate the many roles that the sector play in challenging traditional gender norms. In this section we will focus on one of them: the importance of early childhood education on the understanding of gender.

It is important to remark that the formation of gender identity – and the social expectations associated to each – is developed in early childhood (Chi, 2008). Research shows that the majority of children use the gender labels girl or boy before they are two years old (Zosuls, Ruble, Tamis-LeMonda, and Martin, 2013). From that moment, they start to develop a binary system of meaning that will have a strong impact in their future lives. Children report gender stereotypes and gender-stereotypical ability beliefs, peer preferences, and career aspirations from a very young age (Olsson and Martiny, 2018). Vasileva (2018) highlights the importance of play in tackling these norms. The author explains that play offers children a context for social learning. Through their play choices, children exercise and further develop their understanding of gender. The educator plays an important role in positively acknowledging and supporting children who challenge gendered play boundaries, therefore signalling that the play environment is a space devoid of gender constraints.

In Ireland, both Siolta and Aistear, the quality framework and the national curriculum framework for the early years sector, respectively, include gender considerations. But in order to make sure that those principles are reaching and benefiting children in Ireland, three conditions are imperative: a trained and gender-balanced childcare workforce; a system of provision that is inclusive of all children, across different age and social groups; and the promotion of initiatives and pedagogical practices that tackle gender norms in early years settings.

- Please identify the steps to be taken to address the issues raised and who should address them (e.g. the state, private sector, education system etc.)

First, only an adequately trained childcare workforce will possess the pedagogical knowledge to address gender norms. Even though the qualification levels are generally improving, the target set by First 5 of having a graduate led workforce is only achievable and sustainable if the work conditions in the sector are strongly improved. This point will be further explored under Theme 2. Improved working conditions, along with support campaigns that raise the professional profile of childcare workers and confront traditional gender roles, are very likely to attract more male workers to the sector. Currently, less than 2% of childcare workers are male, while the EU target is 20% (Pobal, 2019; Wayman, 2016). Having a gender balanced workforce provides children with opportunities to relate to a diverse range of adults. It also combats, from an early age, the notion that care professions are exclusively female.

Second, given that gender awareness develops from a very early age, including under 3’s in a high quality ECEC system is an important instrument for deconstructing traditional gender

norms for future generations. But the current system of provision is highly age selective. The capacity of early years settings to cater for under 3's is well below the levels of potential demand. Current places available could only meet 21% of all pupils aged 1-2, and 37% aged 2-3, approximately. It is unsurprising that more than half of children on waiting lists are under 3's (Pobal, 2019). In addition, the current system of provision is also highly selective socially. According to OECD (2016) Ireland is the second most unequal country regarding participation rates in formal ECEC services according to income groups. This means that children from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately outside the formal ECEC system, while they are the most exposed to negative gender stereotypes.

Third, innovative pedagogical initiatives tackling negative attitudes and stereotypes with regard to gender roles should be promoted and rewarded. Those activities can be used to design pilot interventions to be after disseminated.

Although achieving the above conditions are necessary steps for tackling gender norms, they are not sufficient conditions. First and foremost, children are exposed to gender roles in their immediate environment through their parents, siblings, relatives, neighbors and peers. The social environment in general, which includes the media and popular culture, often reinforce traditional gender roles. This way, measures that tackle gender roles within early years settings will only have an effect on future generations if combined with measures that tackle gender roles in society generally. A few of those measures will be explored in the following sections.

## **Theme 2: Work: Occupational segregation by gender, gender discrimination and the gender pay gap**

Women and men are often concentrated into different kinds of jobs and within the same occupations, women are often in work that is less well paid and has less opportunities for career advancement. Women often work in areas where they can work part-time so as to fit in with their caring responsibilities. While many men work in low paid jobs, many professions dominated by women are also low paid, and professions that have become female-dominated have become lower paid. This worsens the gender pay gap (the average difference between the wages of women and men who are working).

- Please outline what you see as the key barriers/ obstacles and challenges to gender equality under this theme in law, policy and practice.

In Ireland, women form 80.2% of the administrative and secretarial workers, 72% of education workers and 78% of human health and social work professionals. On the other hand, only 17% of CEOs and only 25% of those working in Ireland's hard science and technology sectors are women. As these numbers suggest, the Irish labour market is strongly gender segregated by international standards (McLoughlin, 2018). Occupational segregation is one of the main contributors to the gender pay gap, as it largely concentrates women in lower paid sectors. From this perspective, two main strategies to reducing the gender pay gap can be highlighted: first, to improve working conditions in the low-paid sectors that are traditionally female-dominated; and second, to make those sectors more gender balanced.

In the specific case of childcare, 98.2% of workers are female. The average hourly wage of staff working in the sector is €12.55 and six out of ten staff earn below the living wage rate of 2019

of €12.30 per hour. In addition to the low wages, early years workers are frequently employed on fixed term contracts that last for 38 weeks, and on a part time basis. Driven by the ECCE scheme rules, over half of services (52%) are open only up to 38 weeks and almost half (46%) of services operate for up to 20 hours a week during term time. 54% of staff worked less than 30 hours a week in 2018/19 (Pobal, 2019).

- Please identify the steps to be taken to address the issues raised and who should address them (e.g. the state, private sector, education system etc.)

In a sector which is at a break even point, wage increases that do not trigger increases in fees require substantial public investment. Ireland invests only 0.1% of the GDP in early years, which is the lowest level in the EU and way below the OECD average of 0.8% (OECD, 2019). Once public investment is increased, mechanisms should be developed to ensure that this funding is reaching employees, giving that the state is not the employer. The government has demonstrated interest in creating a Sectoral Employment Order for the sector, but we believe that more research is necessary to inform this decision. All instruments available should be mapped, also in light of the international experience, so we can have an ex-ante evaluation of which mechanisms are more likely to have a positive and long-lasting impact in the sector. Once the chosen mechanism is in place, wage increases should be complemented by frameworks for wage progression and access to pension plans.

In addition, part-year contracts promote precarious working conditions and result in most ECEC staff relying on social protection payments as a source of income in the summer months. It is the position of Early Childhood Ireland that this arrangement is no longer defensible and are calling on the government to extend the ECCE to 52 weeks in the forthcoming budget in order to enhance sectoral sustainability, promote fair employment practices and build quality into year-round ECEC provision. It is also imperative that the terms of this extension are negotiated with various stakeholders in the sector.

But it is also important to highlight that within the current structures of childcare provision in Ireland, simply extending the ECCE model would not suit many childcare workers either. This is because many of them have school-age children themselves, and if they worked for more hours a day and for more weeks, they would have to get school-age childcare themselves. This might not make financial sense even after wage increases, given the extremely high costs of childcare in Ireland. This means that isolated interventions will not have a substantial impact if they are not connected to an overall plan that is capable of promoting systemic advancements. A systematic view is presented in the following topic.

### **Theme 3. Care, paid and unpaid, as a social and family responsibility**

#### Care -- the social responsibility of care and women and men's co responsibility for care, especially within the family

Women remain disproportionately responsible for unpaid care and often work in poorly paid care work. For working parents or lone parents, balancing paid work with parenting and or caring for older and dependent adults presents significant challenges. Women are most disadvantaged by these challenges, yet men also suffer from lack of

opportunities to share parenting and caring roles. Despite recent legislation and policy initiatives to support early years parental care, inequalities in the distribution of unpaid care continue between women and men. The cost of childcare has been identified as a particular barrier to work for women alongside responsibilities of caring for older relatives and dependent adults.

- Please outline what you see as the key barriers/ obstacles and challenges to gender equality under this theme in law, policy and practice.

Weak ECEC structures are a direct consequence of traditional gender norms and as such, they are also a root cause of all barriers faced by women in the labour market, which were discussed in detail under Theme 1.

But childcare policies aimed at labour market activation should only be designed in a framework that puts the wellbeing of the child first. With that in mind, Early Childhood Ireland's vision of an appropriate childcare system for the Irish society, according to different age groups, is presented next.

During the first year of their lives, Early Childhood Ireland believes that all children, except those in difficult family circumstances, should have the right to be cared for in the home by their primary caregivers. We believe that children must be able to access this right, regardless of the living situation or family they were born into. We are really encouraged that one aim of the First 5 Strategy is to enable caregivers to care for their children at home in the first year.

We believe it is the Government's responsibility to ensure that children can realise their right to be cared for in the home during the first year. This means that they ensure that factors such as the income of a child's primary caregivers and their employment status, or a child's or caregivers' disability status do not inhibit a child's entitlement to early learning and care in their home during the first crucial year of their life. However, all of society including employers, statutory agencies, as well as the Government, need to work collaboratively to make this a reality.

After the age of one, while still preserving parental choice, we believe that the investment focus should be on producing a high quality, universal and affordable system of formal provision. The following measures are pre-conditions for this to be achieved: increased public funding, promoting an ECCE reform and establishing a single Early Years and School Age Childcare Agency.

- Please identify the steps to be taken to address the issues raised and who should address theme (e.g. the state, private sector, education system etc.)

- To facilitate primary caregivers to care for children in the home for a full year, an overhaul of the parental leave and benefit system in Ireland is required. This will include redefining and entwining maternity, paternity and parental leave; combining parental leave and benefit entitlement and periods; extending the duration of parental leave to guarantee care in the home for a minimum of 52 weeks for all children, shared between caregivers (where applicable); increasing the rate of payment to ensure these children and their caregivers can have an adequate standard of living and changing the eligibility requirements of parental leave. We want to ensure the inclusion of all children, primary caregivers and families into the parental leave system on equal terms.

- Increase public funding to a minimum of 1% of GDP. Increased public spending, in addition to boosting wages, socializes the costs that currently heavily fall on parents.
- The gradual extension of the ECCE scheme to 52 weeks. The terms of this extension should be discussed with stakeholders in the context of the long-term plan to merge ECCE with the National Childcare Scheme.
- Establishing a single Early Years and School Age Childcare Agency. The Agency would draw together all the different strands currently responsible for oversight and planning in the early years and school-age sector under one roof. It would have sole responsibility for inspections and quality assurance for early years settings, school aged childcare settings and those providing home-based care.
- Instead of the current system of two separate thematic inspections, there would be a single 'whole-setting' inspection to examine all aspects of care and education alongside financial compliance. The work currently being done by Better Start and the County Childcare Committees would be more effectively integrated into the quality assurance infrastructure and a new single-inspection framework would be developed to replace those of Tusla and the Early Years Inspectorate.
- The agency would align and co-ordinate all functions relating to quality and curriculum, planning, administration, funding and capital investment in the early years sector. It would also act as a 'one-stop shop' for all information for parents and providers; providing real-time updated inspection reports, information on the National Childcare Scheme, ECCE and so on.

#### **Theme 4: Women's access to, and representation in, public life and decision making**

##### Ensure women's participation and representation in decision-making and leadership in the workplace, political and public life

Women are systematically underrepresented in leadership in economic and political decision-making. Despite the introduction of a candidate gender quota (through the system of party funding) for national political office, and initiatives to support women's access to corporate decision-making roles, men continue to dominate leadership positions. There are also issues to be considered around how media represents women and men.

- Please outline what you see as the key barriers/ obstacles and challenges to gender equality under this theme in law, policy and practice.

Here we will focus on the issue of women in politics. Even though the introduction of electoral gender quotas, and its recent increase, were very positive policy developments, the Irish parliament is still far from being a women-friendly environment. The fact that female politicians are able to avail of maternity leave is one of the most urgent issues.

- Please identify the steps to be taken to address the issues raised and who should address them (e.g. the state, private sector, education system etc.)

Early Childhood Ireland calls for better leave policies for female politicians. In addition, even though the gender quota has been a success in general, helping to produce a 90% increase in women's candidacy and a 40% increase in the number of women TD elected (Buckley, 2019),

women will only reach their full leadership potential if gender norms are strongly and actively challenged. Women face many more barriers to rise to leadership positions compared to men, *ceteris paribus*, and once they get there, they are treated very differently by the media and the general public.

We would also advocate for more effective policies at both local and national level to ensure family friendly polices for public representatives. The 2016 *Programme for Partnership Government* noted its support for “family friendly working arrangements” in the last Dáil. It is debatable to what extent this was followed through on, but we would encourage the Dáil committee on Procedures and Privileges and the Sub-Committee on Dáil reform to seriously examine these issues at a national level. Similarly, and perhaps more importantly, the Department of Housing Planning and Local Government should begin work to improve the family-friendliness of local government to make it more attractive to women candidates. This could include for example working hours sitting times, mandatory on-site childcare and mandated policies on breast-feeding.

## 5. Where does gender inequality impact most?

To conclude we would be interested in your response to the following question: In which area do you think gender inequality matters most?

Please rank the following in order of importance, 1 being the most important:

- Paid work 1 \_\_
- Home & family life 2 \_\_
- Education 4 \_\_
- Politics and public life 5 \_\_
- Media 6 \_\_
- Caring for others 3 \_\_
- Other – please elaborate -----

➤ Please outline the reasons for your answer below:

All of the areas above are intrinsically related to each other, in a way that it is a difficult task to rank in which areas gender inequality matters the most. Our ranking reflects the following rationale: once gender norms prevail in society, the work life of women is severely affected, as they will tend to be concentrated in areas that are compatible with their family responsibilities and with their prescribed role in society. As a consequence, they will continue to be underrepresented in politics, and the measures

necessary to reverse gender inequalities in various areas will take much longer to be implemented. This way, educational and media discourses tend to keep reproducing traditional gendered discourses and the cycle restarts.

- Please include any further comments or observations you may have here.

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If there is any supplementary information or documents that you would like to submit as part of your consultation, please send this to [info@citizensassembly.ie](mailto:info@citizensassembly.ie), with 'Public Consultation Supplementary Information' in the subject line, along with your name to allow us to correctly match any documents with your submission.