



Society of St. Vincent de Paul

Submission to the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality

MARCH 5, 2020

SVP SOCIAL JUSTICE AND POLICY TEAM

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Summary

The Society of St Vincent de Paul is the largest charity of social concern in Ireland with over 11,000 members in 1200 local conferences. Our primary aim is to provide direct assistance to people in need. Last year we received 160,000 requests for assistance, the majority of which were from households with children typically headed by a mother parenting alone. It is from this perspective we submit this response to the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality.

The following submission provides analysis of the experiences of low-income women and lone parent families who are at risk of and experiencing poverty, focussing on the intimately linked themes of work, income and caring responsibilities.

Summary of Key Issues from the Perspective of the Society of St Vincent de Paul

1. We all have a human right to an adequate standard of living but women are currently at a higher risk of poverty, deprivation and income inadequacy than men.
2. Women are more likely than men to be in low paid work and more likely to be paid at or around the National Minimum Wage (NMW). In 2017, 66 per cent of workers paid between 90 and 110 per cent of the NMW were women, higher than the European average of 58 per cent.
3. Ireland has a "motherhood pay penalty" rather than a "female pay penalty"- the median income of full-time female workers without children is 4 per cent higher than men, yet mothers working full-time earn less than fathers working full-time.
4. Child and family care responsibilities limit women's trajectory in the labour market. Of those who were working part-time in 2018, 60% of women stated this was due to caring or other family responsibilities compared to 14% of men. Women also carry out a much greater proportion of unpaid work in the home.
5. Lone parents – 86 per cent of whom are women - are among the groups most at risk of poverty in Ireland today. Lone parent families make up 25 per cent of families with children in the general population but are over-represented in the share of families experiencing poverty, making up 38 per cent of families at risk of poverty based on income, and 42 per cent of families in consistent poverty (meaning they are also experiencing material deprivation). Work isn't always a route of poverty as working lone parents are five times more likely to be in poverty than couple parents in work.
6. The most acute presentation of poverty is homelessness and in 2019 58 per cent of families experiencing homelessness were headed by a single parent.
7. Inflexible jobs and unaffordable services, including childcare and housing, mean life is particularly difficult for lone parents in poverty and recent increases in employment rates for lone parents appears to have been in poorly paid work.
8. To adequately support women experiencing poverty, especially those parenting alone government must coordinate a comprehensive policy response that recognises and values caring work, addresses the issue of low and income inadequacy and reduces the cost of living.

Summary of Recommendations

Women and poverty

- I. Introduce a Poverty Reduction Act. The Irish Government should make ending poverty a priority and follow the example of the Canadian, Scottish and New Zealand Governments by introducing legislation to make eliminating poverty by 2030 a legal requirement.
The Act we propose would require the Government of the day to:

- Resource and implement annual cross-governmental action plans to ensure Ireland reaches the target of reducing consistent poverty to 2% or less by 2025.
 - Set a new ambitious child poverty target for 2025.
 - Establish a well-resourced parliamentary oversight committee to monitor action on poverty reduction.
 - Place the process of poverty and equality proofing of all Government policy on a statutory basis, paying attention to the intersection between poverty and gender.
 - Report on each budget day on how the budget will reduce poverty and how the government is progressing towards its targets.
- II. Tackle the issue of low pay and inadequate social welfare by benchmarking social welfare payments against the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) and that the Government commits to introducing a Living Wage based on meeting this standard. Progressively realising these goals by 2025 through increases in income supports and the National Minimum Wage rate alongside reducing the cost of living would move many people out of poverty.
- III. Place a value on caring work in the Irish Constitution by replacing Article 41.2 of the Constitution, which refers to women’s place in the home, with a gender-neutral wording which would support and recognise caring responsibilities in Irish society.

Lone parents, work and welfare

- IV. The government needs a comprehensive action plan to improve the outcomes for lone parent families. This must build on the commitments and recommendations in the National Strategy for Women and Girls, the Action Plan for Jobless Households and the Roadmap for Social Inclusion.
- V. Extend the cut off for Jobseekers Transition Payment until their youngest child reaches 18, so that lone parents can access work full-time or part-time (depending on their caring responsibilities), better in-work income supports, and training opportunities.
- VI. The Government should promote flexible work for all employees through policy and legislation.
- VII. Establish a statutory child maintenance service.

Addressing the high cost of services that disproportionately impact women

- VIII. Build a public system of good quality and affordable childcare and provide free childcare to low income families and those parenting alone.
- IX. Pursue a housing-first approach by increasing the output of built and acquired social housing units, and develop a national affordable ‘cost rental’ option for lower income households.

1. Introduction

The right to an adequate standard of living is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In a poster that was sent to every school in Ireland to mark the 70th anniversary of the Declaration, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission paraphrased Article 25:

'You have the right to have whatever you need so that you and your family: do not fall ill; do not go hungry; have clothes and a house; and are helped if you are out of work, if you are ill, if you are old, if your wife or husband is dead, or if you do not earn a living for any other reason you cannot help.'

It continues:

'Both a mother who is going to have a baby and her baby should get special help. All children have the same right, whether or not the mother is married'.¹²

This Article guarantees the right to a decent standard of living safeguarded by the state. Despite this, 15 per cent of women in Ireland are at risk of poverty³. Of those women, just under half⁴ are living in consistent poverty, which means they are living on an income below 60 per cent of the median and are experiencing material deprivation (meaning they have been unable to afford 2 basic goods or services in the last year). Men are approximately 2 percentage points less likely to be at risk of poverty, and 1 percentage point less likely to be living in consistent poverty. For both men and women, all poverty measures have decreased in the last year of data.

The next section looks at women in low paid work and in-work poverty, and the role that care, paid and unpaid, plays in women's lives.

2. Women and work

Between 2000 and 2018, increasing numbers of women have been participating in the labour market and fewer women are now 'economically inactive' – not in work, and not seeking work⁵.

Figure 1 presents the median income of full-time workers (which includes earnings and social transfers). It shows that the unequal distribution between men and women can be understood as a 'motherhood penalty'. In 2018, full-time women *without* children had a 4 per cent higher income than men without children. In the years to 2011 this gap grew rapidly to reach 9 per cent in 2011, before shrinking to 0 per cent in 2014. It has now reappeared.

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights Poster available at:

<https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2018/12/HumanRights-A1Poster.jpg>

²The original wording is as follows: *'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection'*

Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Pages/Language.aspx?LangID=eng>

³ CSO: Income and Poverty Rates by Sex, statistical indicator and Year EU-SILC [SIA12]

⁴ 6.2 per cent of women are living in consistent poverty.

⁵ Callaghan, N., Ivory, K., Lavelle, O. (2018) 'Social Impact Assessment: Female Labour Force Participation' IGEES. Available at: <https://igees.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/SIA-Female-Labour-Force-Participation.pdf>

The situation in households with children is reversed, with full-time women *with* children earning less than full-time men with children. This shows that focussing on family circumstances as well as gender is fundamental to fully understanding gender equality. The headline gender pay gap conceals the reversal in incomes that takes place once a family has children. As this gap exists for full-time workers, it is not just hours of work that impact the lower incomes of women that we see referred to in the gender pay gap, but also the sector of employment, seniority of position, and societal value we place on different types of work.

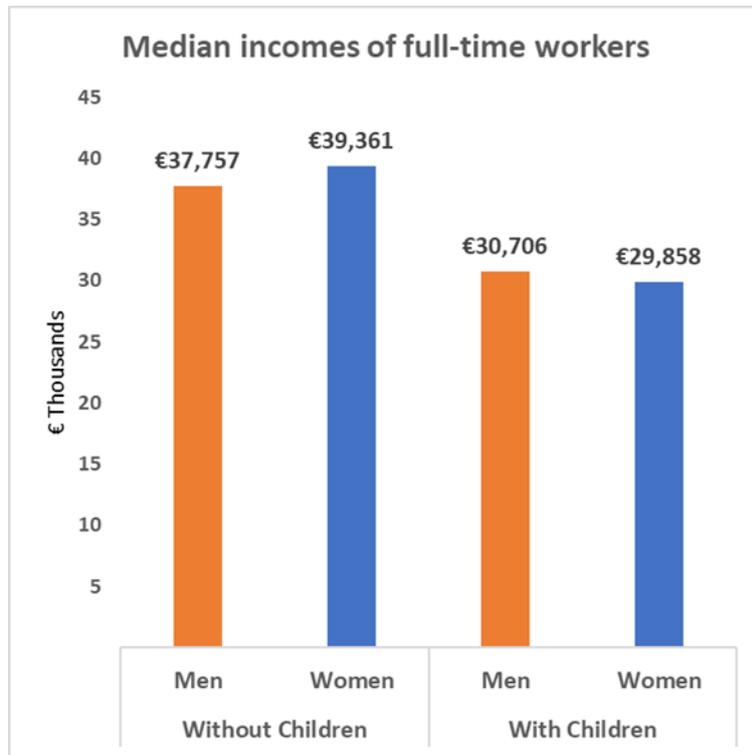


Figure 1: Median equivalised incomes of men and women, with and without children.

Source: Eurostat EU-SILC [ilc_di07]

Women are more concentrated in certain sectors of the economy including Education, and Human Health and Social Work, with more men working in Construction, followed by Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing, and Transportation and Storage⁶. The sectors that more women work in have been subject to casualisation of working conditions over the last decade including jobs in childcare, care of the elderly and personal care⁷. Alongside direct discrimination, women suffer an income penalty due to the value we place on different types of jobs.

We know that at the lower end of the earnings distribution, women are more likely than men to be in low paid work and more likely to be paid at or around the National Minimum Wage (NMW)⁸. In 2017, 66 per cent of workers paid between 90 and 110 per cent of the NMW were women, higher

⁶ Callaghan, N., Ivory, K., Lavelle, O. (2018) 'Social Impact Assessment: Female Labour Force Participation' IGEES. Available at: <https://igees.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/SIA-Female-Labour-Force-Participation.pdf>

⁷ O'Connor, O. (2019) 'Women and Work' in 'Ensuring Good Future Jobs' TASC and Carnegie UK Trust.

⁸ Doorley, K. (2018) 'Minimum Wages and the Gender Gap in Pay'. ESRI. Available at: <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2018-12/RB201827.pdf>

than the European average of 58 per cent⁹. Because women are over-represented in this group, any increases in the NMW will benefit more women: a study of the introduction of the NMW has shown it significantly reduced the gender pay gap in Ireland¹⁰. For single adults working full time and living in the private rented sector, pay at the NMW level is insufficient to have a decent quality of life as measured by the Minimum Essential Standard of Living, as the NMW is 21 per cent lower than the Living Wage¹¹.

2.1 Part-time work

Alongside low pay, low hours put people at risk of poverty. The gap in part-time employment between men and women currently stands at 19 per cent with part-time employment making up 11 per cent of employment for men, and 30 per cent for women¹².

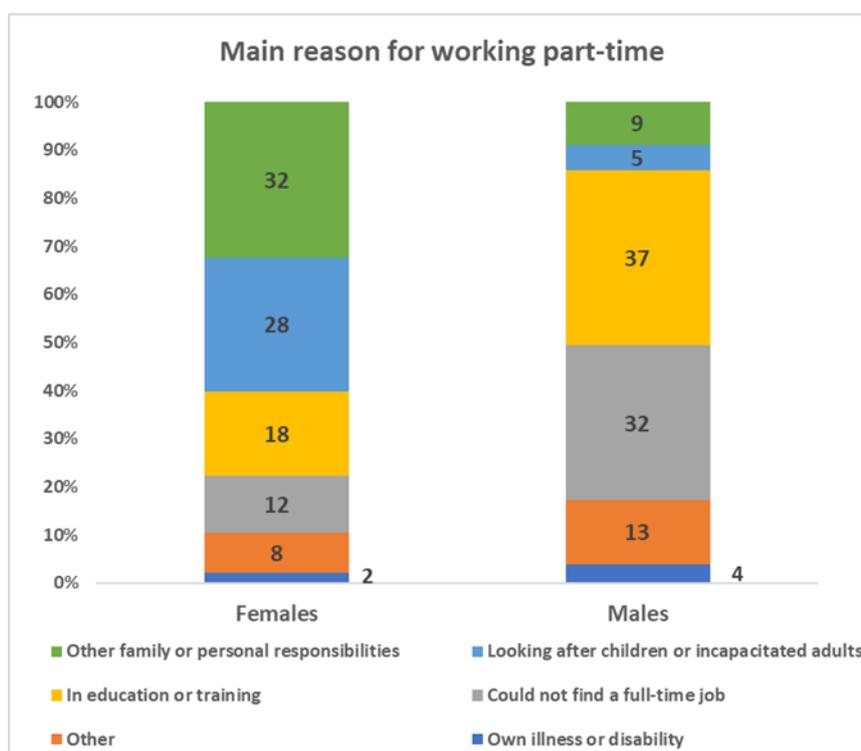


Figure 2: Main reason for part-time employment

Source: Eurostat: LFS [lfsa_epgar]

As shown in Figure 2, women reported the most common reasons for working part-time as ‘Other family or personal responsibilities’, followed by ‘Looking after children or incapacitated adults.’

For men, the most commonly cited reasons for working part-time were ‘In education or training’ followed by ‘Could not find a full-time job.’ In contrast to the answers for women, neither of these categories relate to family care, and indeed both categories point towards the potential to improve

⁹ Eurofound (2019) Minimum wages in 2019: Annual Review.

https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef19028en.pdf

¹⁰ Bargain et al (2018) cited in Eurofound (2019) ‘Minimum wages in 2019: Annual Review.

https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef19028en.pdf

¹¹ VPSJ (2019) ‘Minimum Essential Standard of Living 3029 Update Report’ Available at:

https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2019_update_report.pdf

¹² Eurostat EU-SILC [lfsa_eppga]

income in the future through using new skills gained through training or increasing hours when a full-time job becomes available.

The OECD have reported that in Ireland women do 300 minutes of unpaid work per day compared to 130 minutes for men¹³. Across countries, women’s disproportionate levels of unpaid working hours limit their access to and progression within the labour market – the OECD found that when male partners take on more housework, women can participate more in employment¹⁴. The reality for many women is that the prospect of increased income from full-time work must be balanced against the requirement of someone to fulfil care responsibilities in the family.

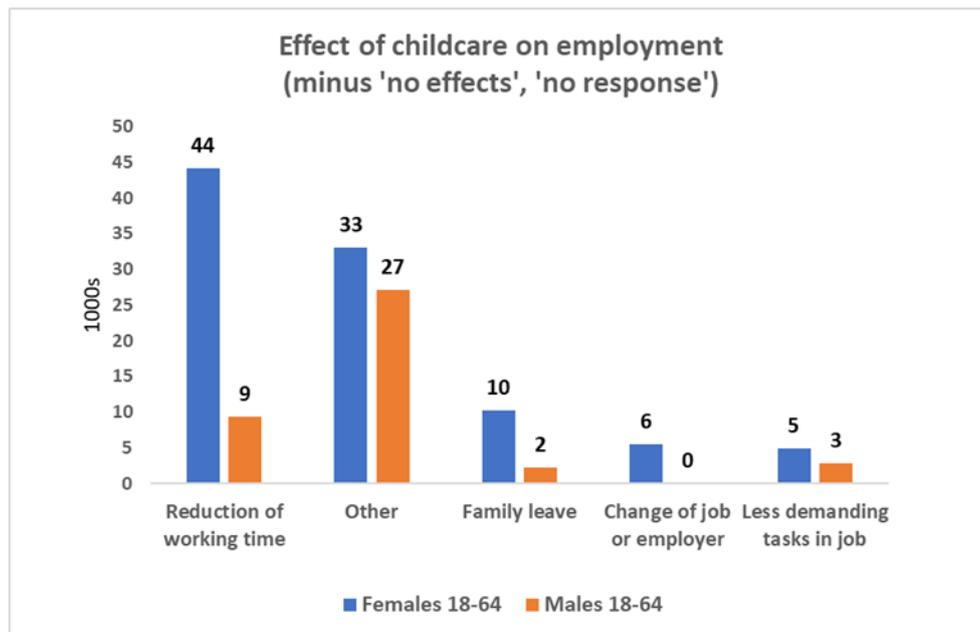


Figure 3: The effect of childcare on employment

Source: Eurostat: LFS [lfs_18ceffed]

Figure 3 shows the reported effect of childcare on a person’s career. The graph shows that childcare has an effect on the employment of significantly more women than men. Although the numbers represented in Figure 3 only amount to 16 per cent of respondents (most of both groups reported ‘no effect’) there is a clearly gendered pattern in people who did report an effect, with women’s careers bearing a heavy burden from childcare responsibilities.

The most common impact of childcare on women’s employment is through a reduction in working time, with 44,000 women reporting this effect. 10,000 further women reported taking family leave, while 5,500 reported changing their job, and 5,000 more switched to less demanding tasks. Cumulatively, almost 100,000 women reported an effect on their employment due to childcare responsibilities.

The careful balancing of child and family care with employment is made more difficult when the cost of supporting services is prohibitively expensive. In Ireland, the majority of childcare is provided

¹³ OECD (2017) ‘The pursuit of gender equality: an uphill battle.’ https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/the-pursuit-of-gender-equality_9789264281318-en#page192

¹⁴ Ibid.

through the private sector¹⁵ leading to costs amongst the highest in the OECD¹⁶. For a couple with two children, both earning 67 per cent of the average wage (the low pay threshold), 24 per cent of their net income would be taken by childcare costs (the third highest amount in the OECD). If one of the adults in the couple worked at the NMW, the costs would rise to 28 per cent of their income (and the highest in the OECD).

2.2 In-work poverty

For people who are in work but also struggling with poverty due to low incomes and a high cost of living, the benefits of employment can be offset by the challenges of low pay and precarious conditions.

Last year SVP surveyed some of our members to understand the challenges facing the people they support, focusing on households where someone was in work¹⁷. The open answers provide a unique insight into SVP volunteers' perspectives on the daily struggles that result from low paid work, as well as the benefits employment can bring to families they are supporting.

The social benefits of work were overwhelming, with respondents citing 'dignity', 'self-esteem' and 'hope'. Many respondents mentioned parents wanting to 'set an example' for their children, and better mental health was repeatedly mentioned.

The darker side of low paid work was the stress of low and unpredictable incomes and the fear of losing access to valuable social protections such as a medical card. The cost of being at work could be considerable, including childcare and transport to reach a job. For families depending on the income from work, unavoidable situations like a car breaking down or sickness of parent or child could lead to 'panic' at the prospect of losing a day or more's pay. The fear of relying on an unpredictable income came from unpredictable hours of work (due to seasonality as well as employer discretion), being unsure about ongoing welfare eligibility, and trying to balance the amount that could be earned with the cost of getting to work.

We also asked our members what would help the people living in in-work poverty that they supported. Three answers came top with 69 per cent of the 134 respondents each choosing: 'Increase in the National Minimum Wage'; 'More supports for education or training'; and 'More supports for Childcare', followed less than 1 per cent behind by 'More flexible social welfare system.' These answers display the importance of raising wage rates to combat low pay, but the equally important role of improving services and income supports: education and training, childcare and social welfare that works for people on low incomes would all help protect families in poverty.

¹⁵ Daly, M. (2019). 'In-work poverty in Ireland.' European Social Policy Network <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=21107&langId=en>

¹⁶ <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=NCC>

¹⁷ The Society of St Vincent de Paul has over 10,000 volunteers working in 1,200 local groups on the island of Ireland (North and South). In total, 134 local groups or "conferences" responded to the survey on in-work poverty. Each conference answered the questions based on their experience of supporting households in need. While the survey gives insight into SVP volunteers views and experiences, it is not a representative sample.

Recommendations:

- I. *Introduce a Poverty Reduction Act. The Irish Government should make ending poverty a priority and follow the example of the Canadian, Scottish and New Zealand Governments by introducing legislation to make eliminating poverty by 2030 a legal requirement.*

The Act we propose would require the Government of the day to:

- *Resource and implement annual cross-governmental action plans to ensure Ireland reaches the target of reducing consistent poverty to 2% or less by 2025.*
- *Set a new ambitious child poverty target for 2025.*
- *Establish a well-resourced parliamentary oversight committee to monitor action on poverty reduction.*
- *Place the process of poverty and equality proofing of all Government policy on a statutory basis, paying attention to the intersection between poverty and gender.*
- *Report on each budget day on how the budget will reduce poverty and how the government is progressing towards its targets.*

- II. *Tackle the issue of low pay and inadequate social welfare by benchmarking social welfare payments against the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) and that the Government commits to introducing a Living Wage based on meeting this standard. Progressively realising these goals by 2025 through increases in income supports and the National Minimum Wage rate alongside reducing the cost of living would move many people out of poverty.*

- III. *Place a value on caring work in the Irish Constitution by replacing Article 41.2 of the Constitution, which refers to women's place in the home, with a gender-neutral wording which would support and recognise caring responsibilities in Irish society.*

As displayed in this section, the worlds of work and care are inextricably linked. For women, who carry out the vast majority of unpaid household and care work¹⁸, the balance between family responsibilities and employment can have a negative effect on incomes throughout the life course. The particular experience of lone parents who balance work with family responsibilities are discussed in the next section

3. Lone parent families

In this section we will expand on the experience of lone parent families, the group we hear from most at St Vincent de Paul, and a group headed by 86 per cent women¹⁹. For lone parents, securing

¹⁸ OECD (2017) 'The pursuit of gender equality: an uphill battle.' https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/the-pursuit-of-gender-equality_9789264281318-en#page192

¹⁹ CSO Statbank LFS [LFH10]

an adequate income goes alongside having sole responsibility for the family. The role of social protection and accessible and affordable services is vital in protecting these families from poverty.

Figure 4 shows that lone parents are over-represented in measures of poverty and in families experiencing homelessness. Lone parent families make up 25 per cent of families with children in the general population²⁰ but, as the graph below shows, are over-represented in the share of families experiencing poverty, making up 38 per cent of families at risk of poverty based on income, and 42 per cent of families in consistent poverty (meaning they are also experiencing material deprivation)²¹.

The most acute presentation of poverty is homelessness and in 2019 58 per cent of families experiencing homelessness were headed by a single parent²².

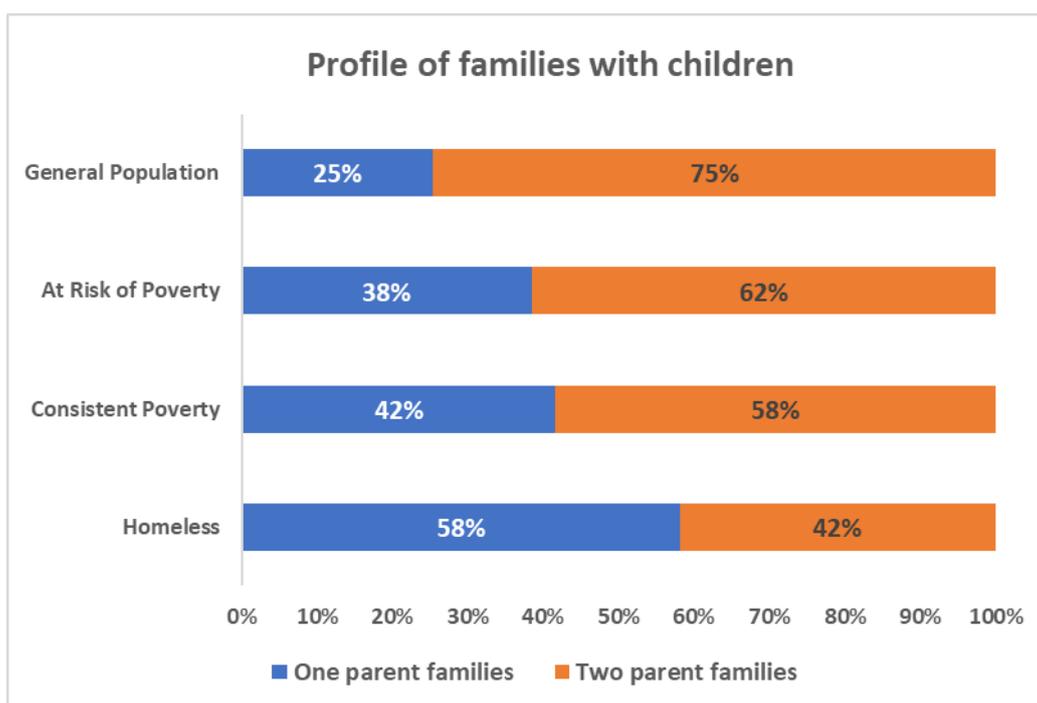


Figure 4: The profile of families experiencing poverty and homelessness

Source: CSO: EU-SILC [SIA31], Census 2016 [EY016] and HPLG Homelessness Report May 2019

Lone parent families are at a higher risk than two parent families across all measures of poverty. As displayed in Figure 5 the increased risk for lone parent families results from the dramatic drop in median household income when there is only a single earner. When adjusted for the number of people in the household, lone parent families experienced an income penalty with a median disposable income of €16,500 while two parent families took home €23,300.

Low incomes for lone parent families are reflected in an extremely high material deprivation rate which stands at 43 per cent, three times higher than for two parent families at 14 per cent.

²⁰ CSO: Census 2016 [EY016]

²¹ CSO: EU-SILC survey [SIA31]

²² Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government (2019) 'Homelessness Report May 2019' Available at https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_report_-_may_2019.pdf

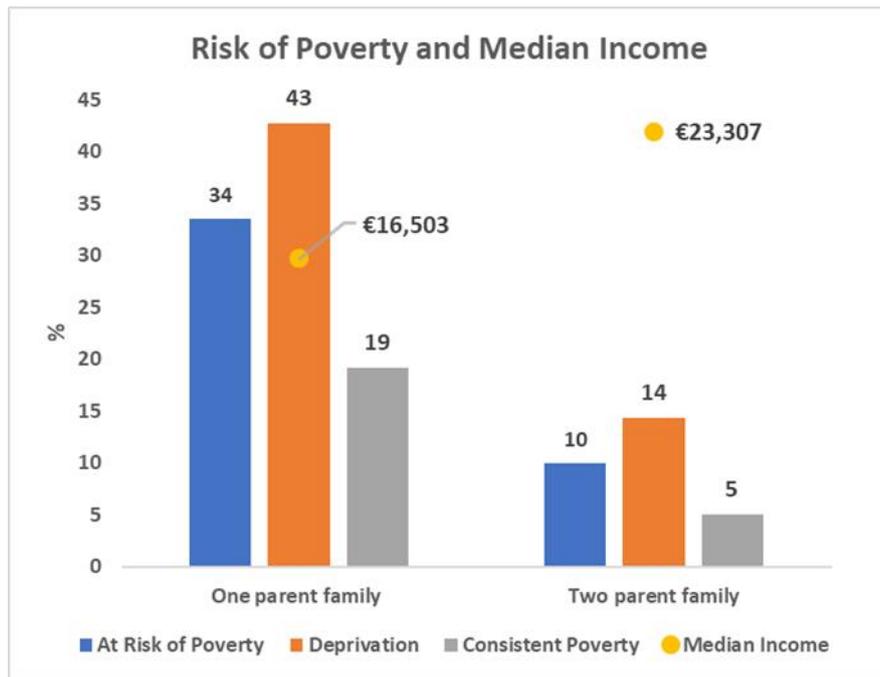


Figure 5: The poverty risk and median incomes of different household types.

Source: CSO: EU-SILC [SIA16]

At SVP our members see every day that lone parents are struggling with low income and poverty. In 2014 we carried out interviews with 61 one parent families to explore their experience in more depth²³. Despite a much-changed economic context since 2014 the difficulties faced by these respondents continue today. One parent reflected on the difficulty of planning for the future when there are urgent, immediate challenges to find solutions to:

“It is very stressful being poor...Although you don’t think about next week or next month you are constantly thinking about tomorrow or the next day...Will I be able to get some food for the dinner...Will we have electricity next week...It’s real basic but Jesus it’s stressful.

Another parent spoke about the tight-rope of living on a low income, and a feeling that at some point missing a payment was inevitable:

“When you are on such a tight budget you are going to get caught out somewhere. You have to get the groceries in and you have to pay the rent... You are going to fall behind somewhere...Even though you need to heat the house, the gas and the leccy (bills) will be a squeeze.”

The personal struggle of parenting alone and having sole responsibility for juggling home and children on a low income were talked about:

“It’s constantly bills, bills and yeah, ever going. You have to live life based around your bills and have to budget and it’s a struggle. I do really struggle. I do. Every day, every week. You’re kind of just living from day to day, payday to payday, Thursday to Thursday.”

²³ SVP (2014) ‘It’s the hardest job in the world’ Available at: <https://www.svp.ie/getattachment/0dfc3b0e-9165-4792-946e-43f84199eb57/It-s-The-Hardest-Job-in-The-World.aspx>

The challenge of providing an adequate standard of living for children on a low income is clear. To protect children in one parent families from poverty, social transfers must ensure that incomes – primary support and earning supports – are bolstered to accurately reflect what it costs to live.

3.1 Lone parents in work

The statistics and experiences discussed above refer to all one parent families experiencing poverty, whether in work or out of work. Currently, 64 per cent of one parent families are in work, balancing employment and family life²⁴. However, when lone parents do work, they are more than five times as likely to be in in-work poverty than households with two adults.

Evidence from DEASP suggests that the increase in in-work poverty among lone parents is due to employment gains being concentrated in low-income jobs as it has been accompanied by a doubling of families receiving the Working Family Payment²⁵.

The challenge of high rates of poverty among lone parent families can be seen in many other European jurisdictions, where increases in employment levels haven't reduced the risk of poverty²⁶, in large part due to the type of work lone parents – mainly women – are able to access (including the challenges of low pay, low hours and precarious contracts)²⁷.

Between 2012 and 2018, employment rates for lone parents increased by 17 per cent. Simultaneously, the in-work poverty rate for lone parents more than doubled, jumping from 9 percent in 2012 to 21 per cent in 2018²⁸. Despite recent increases in employment, Ireland still compares poorly to other European countries, with the lowest employment rate for lone among EU 15 peer countries.²⁹

This pattern is reflective of the employment impact of motherhood in Ireland more generally, as the employment rate among women in couples with children is the fifth lowest rate among the EU-15 at 69%. However, the gap in employment rates between one and two parent families in Ireland is above the European average at 11 percentage points (EU-15 employment gap = 4 percentage points). This shows that lone parents in Ireland face particular difficulties in accessing employment relative to their female counterparts in two parent households.

In terms of part-time employment, Irish lone parents have the fourth highest rate among all EU-15 countries at 46%, just after the Netherlands, the UK and Germany. However, since 2012 the numbers in part-time employment have fallen significantly from 55% to 42% in 2017. Therefore, the recent growth in lone parents' labour market participation has primarily been in fulltime work.³⁰

The age of children also contributes to lone parent employment rates. In 2017, the employment rate of lone parents (aged 15-64) whose youngest child was aged 0 to 5 years was 47% in 2017 compared to 60% where the youngest child was aged 6 to 11 and 66% where the youngest child was aged 12 to

²⁴ Eurostat: LFS [lfst_hhindws]

²⁵ SVP (2019) 'Working, Parenting, Struggling' Available at <https://www.svp.ie/news-media/publications/social-justice-publications/working,-parenting-and-struggling-full-report.aspx>

²⁶ Jaehrling, K., Kalina, T. and Mesaros, L. (2015) 'A paradox of activation strategies: why increasing labour market participation among single mothers failed to bring down poverty rates', *Social Politics*, Vol 22 (1), pp86-110.

²⁷ Murphy, M. (2016) 'Low road or high road? The post-crisis trajectory of Irish activation', *Critical Social Policy*, Vol 36 (1), pp 1-21.

²⁸ Eurostat: EU-SILC [ilc_iw02]

²⁹ Source: Eurostat EU-SILC survey [lfst_hheredy]

³⁰ Ibid

17. However, the employment rates of mothers in two parent families vary very little depending on the age of their youngest child. Further data shows that lone parents with more than one child are also less likely to work. There is a difference of 15 percentage points in the employment rates of lone parents with one child compared to a lone parent with three or more children (47% compared to 62%).³¹ For females in couples, this differential is 5 percentage.

The differences between lone parents and mothers in two parent households are intuitive. Having more children and having younger children can reduce the attractiveness of having a second adult in paid work due to higher childcare costs. However, as lone parents are the primary earner, their labour market participation is more likely to increase as their childcare needs decrease.

3.2 Lone parents and activation

The increase in employment in lone parents since 2012 is partially due to changes in the social welfare system when lone parents became subject to employment activation strategies, beginning in 2013³².

Previously, the One-parent Family Payment (OFP) was paid to single parents until their youngest child turned 18 (22 if they were in full time education) meaning they did not have to look for work and in recognition of their childcare responsibilities. Now, when a lone parent's youngest child turns seven, they move to a Jobseekers Transitional Payment, meaning they can access the training and employment support of a Jobseeker but do not have to look for or take on employment. The JST in-work income supports are less generous than OFP and parents working part-time can lose up to €80 per week when moving from OFP to JST. When their youngest child turns 14, the parent moves on to Jobseekers Allowance, and as with anyone on this payment must look for and be prepared to take on full-time work. Under JA a parent can only earn up to €60 per week before their payment is affected, whereas under JST they can earn up to €165 per week.

While enabling lone parents to access work is an important policy objective, the changes have taken place in the context of extremely high childcare costs and a dearth of decent flexible and part-time employment. This has pushed parents – and 99 per cent of people on the OFP are mothers³³ – into an unsuitable labour market, often leaving them trapped between poorly paid inflexible work and inflexible social welfare. The reforms failed to recognise the additional practical and financial challenges of parenting alone. The decision to abolish the features of the One Parent Family Payment which support lone parents to take up part-time employment was widely criticised. It is SVP's experience that this has made it more difficult for lone parents with low earnings potential and high levels of caring responsibilities to access employment, education or training, and reduced the income of those already in employment.

In contrast to lone parents, for families with two adults where one is registered for a social welfare payment and the other is registered as a Qualified Adult (QA), the QA is not expected to be available for work regardless of the age of their youngest child. This leaves lone parents whose youngest child

³¹ Ibid

³² Regan, M., Keane, C. and Walsh, J. (2018) 'Lone-parent incomes and work incentives'. ESRI. Available at: <https://www.esri.ie/system/files?file=media/file-uploads/2018-07/BP201901.pdf>

³³ CSO (2016) 'Women and Men in Ireland 2016' Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-wamii/womenandmeninireland2016/socialcohesionandlifestyles/>

is 14 or over at a disadvantage to primary carers in two parent families, as they are expected to both be available for full time work and provide care for their child.

When changes in activation policy were first proposed over a decade ago, Qualified Adults – estimated around 90 per cent of whom are women³⁴ – were going to be required to take step to join the labour market, introducing activation for them at the same time as lone parents. However this failed to materialise for QAs, and the inequality that now exists between lone and couple parents reinforces the male-breadwinner model of social welfare in Ireland, with two parent families expected and supported to have one full-time earner and one full-time caregiver³⁵.

Employment policy can recognise parental responsibility by building in the right to leave and flexibility. Finland recently announced that their generous parental leave allowance would be split equally by parents of any gender, and that single parents would be entitled to the total amount of leave for two parents³⁶. In Ireland however, parent's and parental leave is allocated per adult, so a single parent doesn't receive additional time. By effectively offering the total entitlement per child rather than per parent, Finland's policy recognises that a child does not require half the amount of care and flexibility because they are parented by one adult.

The OECD have found that professional and managers have greater access to working time flexibility compared to clerical staff, sales workers and employees in other occupations including cleaners, food preparation assistances, etc³⁷. The right to request flexible working applies to all employees in Belgium, France, Germany, New Zealand and the UK³⁸. For workers in New Zealand and the UK this includes a comprehensive definition of flexibility including scheduling and place of work.

When lone parents do transition to the labour market, they must be supported to access good quality work that is suitable for their family situations and provided with services such as childcare and housing that is accessible and affordable. The next section discusses lone parent's experience of these services.

3.3 Cost of living

Childcare and homecare

Headline poverty figures reveal the much higher risk for lone parent families than two parent families in Ireland, but for all households the at risk of poverty rate conceals the impact of significant costs such as housing and childcare. This has a real impact on the experience of those living in poverty, as Ireland's cost of living is currently the second highest in the EU³⁹. For lone parents, these costs are not necessarily lower than for two parent families, and yet the income from which they are taken is likely to be considerably lower.

Childcare is a vital service in supporting lone parents to access work. Figure 6 shows that almost 60 percent of lone parents who aren't using childcare are doing so because the cost is prohibitive. This is the second highest rate in EU 15 countries. ESRI looked into this data in more detail and found that

³⁴ Murphy, M. (2018) 'Ode to an invisible woman: The story of qualified adults and partners in Ireland. Irish Journal of Sociology. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0791603516629088>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ New York Times (2019) 'Finland Plans to Give All New Parents the Same Leave.' Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/06/world/europe/finland-parental-leave-equality.html>

³⁷ OECD (2016) 'Be flexible! Background brief on how workplace flexibility can help European employees to balance work and family.' Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/Be-Flexible-Backgrounder-Workplace-Flexibility.pdf>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Eurostat: Comparative price levels – Household Expenditure [TEC00120]

for lone parents who reported a need for childcare services and yet couldn't access them, financial reasons were the main barrier for 91 per cent of respondents⁴⁰.

In countries such as Sweden childcare is universally subsidised and so cost doesn't limit the use of these services, whereas in Ireland a single parent with two children earning the NMW wage would lose a quarter of their net income to pay for childcare⁴¹. For a lone parent paid the average wage, the cost would be the most expensive in the OECD.

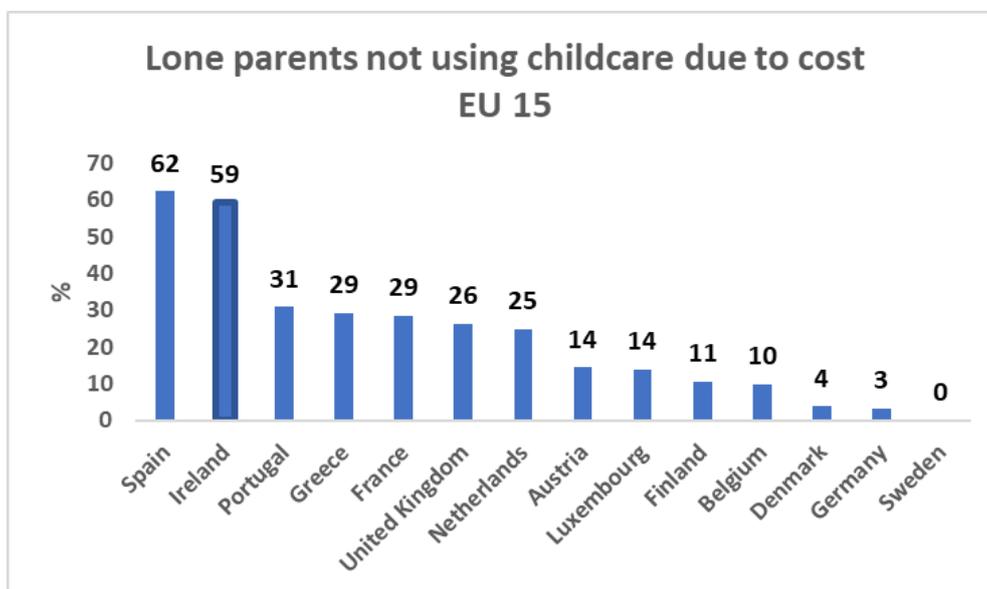


Figure 6: Lone parents citing financial reasons for not using childcare

Source: Eurostat: EU-SILC [ilc_ats04]. Data from Italy is unavailable.

Flexibility benefits a range of people with caring responsibilities beyond parents caring for children. An ESRI study found that Ireland stands out in Europe for having a high level of working age people who either need home care or live with someone who needs home care⁴². Most people (76 per cent) in Ireland who require home care do not receive professional care. Across Europe the difference in employment rates for men and women is larger in households with unmet care needs as a result of women taking on informal care in the absence of professional options.

Across both childcare and home care, having an unmet care need in the household was associated with lower working rates for lone parents, and a larger employment gap for men and women respectively⁴³. Improved access to and affordability of care options would promote the inclusion of lone parents and women in the labour market.

Housing

The housing crisis at its worst can leave families homeless for extended lengths of time, living in temporary accommodation and without a secure place for children to grow up. For other families,

⁴⁰ Grotti et al. (2019) 'Technical paper on access to care services in Ireland: Social Inclusion Technical Paper No. 9.'

⁴¹ <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=NCC>

⁴² ESRI (2019) Access to Childcare and Home Care Services across Europe'. Available at https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/2019-08-29-Access%20to%20Care%20Services%20Final%20Version%202.0_1.pdf

⁴³ Ibid.

the cost of renting can leave their income so stretched they struggle to keep on top of rent payments or they are forced to go without other goods and services.

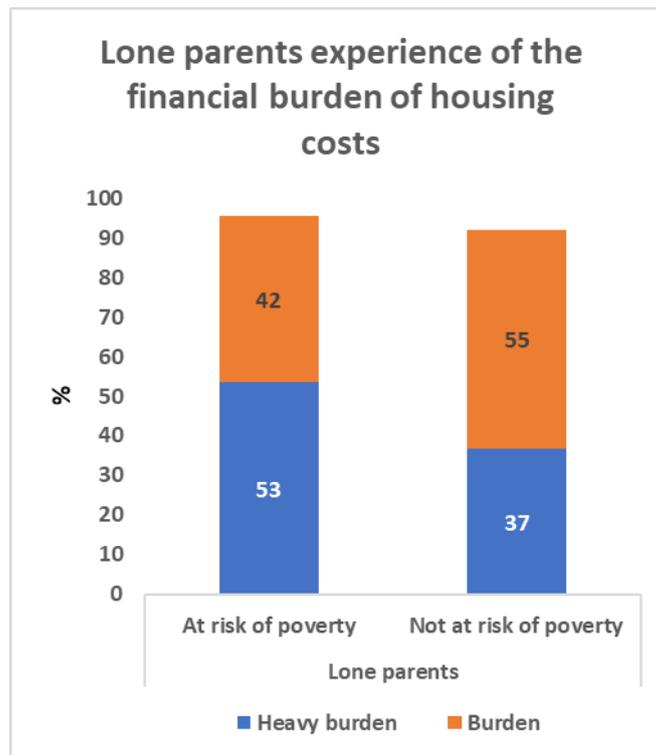


Figure 7: Lone parents experience of housing costs

Source: Eurostat: EU-SILC [ilc_md04]

As Figure 7 shows, lone parents experience a significant burden from the costs of housing. For families at risk of poverty, over half say that housing is a heavy financial burden, with a further 42 percent experiencing housing costs as a burden. Only five per cent don't find costs a struggle. For lone parent families *above* the poverty line, still 92 per cent struggle with the costs of housing. For two parent families with two children, the situation is slightly better for those not living in poverty (20 per cent don't find housing a burden) but is in fact worse for those living in poverty. This shows that across the income distribution and across household situations the way we enable families to access housing isn't working.

When costs become too much of a burden and families are no longer able to keep up with payments, homelessness is a risk. Focus Ireland have reported that the majority of families who become homeless in Dublin report their last stable accommodation as the private rented sector (PRS)⁴⁴. Grotti et al found that groups that experience housing discrimination and equality, including lone parent families, are over-represented in the PRS, and so recommend increasing the security and affordability of that tenure type⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ Focus Ireland (2019) 'Press release: Focus Ireland report finds that nearly 70 per cent of families becoming homeless in Dublin had their last home in the rental sector'. Available at: <https://www.focusireland.ie/press/focus-ireland-report-finds-that-nearly-70-of-families-becoming-homeless-in-dublin-had-their-last-home-in-the-rental-sector/>

⁴⁵ Grotti et al (2018) 'Discrimination and Inequality in Housing in Ireland'. IHREC. Available at: <https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2018/06/Discrimination-and-Inequality-in-Housing-in-Ireland..pdf>

The high cost of housing means that the risk of homelessness is much higher for lone parents, who make up 58 per cent of the 1700 families who were experiencing homelessness in one week last year⁴⁶. Lone parents are particularly vulnerable across multiple measures of housing inequality, including discrimination, housing deprivation, and environmental problems⁴⁷.

3.4 Child Maintenance Arrangements

A comparatively low level of maintenance is paid to lone parents by their former partners. According to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, which appeared before the Joint Committee on Social Protection in October 2016, only 35% of lone parents are in receipt of child maintenance payments.

Research by One Family shows that current mechanisms available to parents to seek maintenance orders, and their subsequent enforcement, rest with those who are seeking the payment, placing an excessive burden on them.⁴⁸ Parents – typically a mother – must utilise the family law courts to legally seek and enforce these requests. Many parents find the court process daunting and overwhelming and require, often costly, legal advice in order to fully utilise the family courts system effectively. There is also inconsistency and a lack of transparency regarding how the courts decide how much maintenance should be paid by the non-resident parent. State intervention is needed to better support these families.

Some countries, mostly Nordic (Denmark, Norway, Finland, Sweden) and some Central European states (Germany), operate systems of guaranteed maintenance which involves state departments making provisions to ensure children actually receive maintenance consistently even where non-custodial parents are unwilling to pay. Countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland and United States view child maintenance as a financial obligation on liable relatives governed by family law placing the burden on custodial parents in seeking maintenance arrangements. The affect of these two aforementioned approaches to maintenance governance and provision mean very different outcomes for one-parent families. Children have better outcomes in those countries where a guaranteed state mechanism is in place for the payment of child maintenance.⁴⁹

3.5. Policy response

The National Strategy for Women and Girls recommends that services provided by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) to support people into employment should be easier to access for lone parents⁵⁰.

This is an important barrier for lone parents, and a 2016 report on international best practice in supporting lone parents into quality employment recommended a caseworker approach⁵¹. This

⁴⁶ Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government (2019) 'Homelessness Report May 2019' Available at https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_report_-_may_2019.pdf

⁴⁷ Grotti et al (2018) 'Discrimination and Inequality in Housing in Ireland'. IHREC. Available at: <https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2018/06/Discrimination-and-Inequality-in-Housing-in-Ireland..pdf>

⁴⁸ One Family Ireland (2017) 'Ireland's First National Shared Parenting Survey' p9ff) https://onefamily.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/One-Family_Shared-Parenting_Results-and-Recommendations_FINAL-REPORT_Online.pdf

⁴⁹ EU Commission (2014) 'Child maintenance systems in EU Member States from a gender perspective.' [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2014/474407/IPOL-FEMM_NT\(2014\)474407_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2014/474407/IPOL-FEMM_NT(2014)474407_EN.pdf)

⁵⁰ Department of Justice and Equality (2017) 'National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020'. Available at: http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/National_Strategy_for_Women_and_Girls_2017-2020

⁵¹ Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (2017) 'Action Plan for Jobless Households' https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/Action_Plan_for_Jobless_Households.pdf

would involve assisting lone parents with job searching, training and education opportunities, looking for childcare and calculating the financial impact of being in work.

Relevant commitments regarding local employment services are also contained in the Action Plan for Jobless Households which aims to support those in "jobless" households into employment as well as to reduce child poverty. The headline target is to reduce the number of "jobless" households from 18% to 13% by 2020. It focuses on improving the incentives to employment by:

- Completing the roll-out of the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP), removing disincentives formerly associated with the Rent Supplement scheme
- Introducing a package of reforms to welfare schemes to support working families
- Further expanding access to free and subsidised child-care to reduce the cost to families associated with taking up employment.

The Action Plan makes specific commitments to pilot a family-focused employment service/case management approach in five geographical areas. Led by the employment service, this intervention allows for the involvement of other public services (or referral to such services) where the engagement process identified broader social issues in the household that affected its members' employment prospects.⁵²

This initiative allows Qualified Adults for the first time to access employment supports. While this is a welcome initiative, challenges remain for DEASP to deliver a family centred approach with meaningful service integration built around their needs.

A recent National Economic and Social Council (NESC) report found that within the social welfare and employment support system, (i.e. Intreo, the Local Employment Service and JobPath), a number of issues exist which inhibit the success of activation⁵³:

- There can be a lack of trust between service users and Intreo, and at times, people feel they have no choice about the activation/training options offered.
- Some also felt there were not enough places on sought-after courses with good labour market potential.
- Service users reported that it could be difficult to get information on the options open to them.

The report recommended that a much greater emphasis be placed on the coordination of services, including stronger links between the employment support services and employers, and between the full range of services to support households including childcare. They also recommend that the intensity of supports increases for those most distant from the labour market, including lone parents.

While SVP supports important relevant commitments contained in the National Strategy for Women and Girls, and the Action Plan for Jobless Households, we are concerned that there is no comprehensive or strategic articulation of the long-term vision for lone parents and their children in current Government policy.

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ National Economic and Social Council (2018) Moving from Welfare to Work: Low Work Intensity Households and the Quality of Supportive Services

http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/146_Low_Work_Intensity_Households

In January 2020, DEASP published the Roadmap for Social Inclusion – a five-year plan aimed at reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion among at risk groups in Ireland. This was an opportunity for Government to set out the key targets and actions required to address poverty among one-parent families. Unfortunately, the Roadmap lacks ambition and does not contain a specific target to reduce the poverty risk of lone parents and their children.

Recommendations:

Lone parents, work and welfare

- IV. *The government needs a comprehensive action plan to improve the outcomes for lone parent families. This must build on the commitments and recommendations in the National Strategy for Women and Girls, the Action Plan for Jobless Households and the Roadmap for Social Inclusion.*
- V. *Extend the cut off for Jobseekers Transition Payment until their youngest child reaches 18, so that lone parents can access work full-time or part-time (depending on their caring responsibilities), better in-work income supports, and training opportunities.*
- VI. *The Government should promote flexible work for all employees through policy and legislation.*
- VII. *Establish a statutory child maintenance service.*

Addressing the high cost of services that disproportionately impact women

- VIII. *Build a public system of good quality and affordable childcare and provide free childcare to low income families and those parenting alone.*
- IX. *Pursue a housing-first approach by increasing the output of built and acquired social housing units, and develop a national affordable 'cost rental' option for lower income households.*

4. Conclusion

Women currently shoulder the majority of responsibility for care in Irish society, contributing to them receiving lower incomes than men. For lone parents, the majority of whom are women, poverty is a very real threat. The difficulty in securing good quality and well-paid work is entrenched, with lone parents balancing care for their children with an inflexible labour market. For those lone parents who do secure work, in-work poverty is a much higher risk than for other family types, partially due to the high cost of living in Ireland. For all families, high childcare and housing costs are the product of a broken system of public services, but for lone parents living on a single income, the burden can be overwhelming.

To adequately support lone parents and all families, government must coordinate a comprehensive policy response that recognises and values caring work, addresses the issue of low pay and income inadequacy and reduces the cost of living.

