



Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality – Work

Introduction

Ibec fully supports the work of the Citizens Assembly to address barriers to the full socio-economic equality of women and girls in Ireland. Ibec has been working with employers on diversity and inclusion, with a particular focus on gender balance in organisations, for quite some time, developing policy and resources to address gender imbalance and the barriers facing women in the labour market.

While Ireland has removed many of the overt barriers to women breaking through the glass ceiling in business, there are structural barriers that remain. We have not achieved the level of female labour market participation that is necessary for Ireland to remain competitive and have stalled in some areas such as representative numbers of women achieving senior executive or leadership positions. The causes of this are many and multifaceted requiring action by all stakeholders. This should be addressed through a new social dialogue model between Government, employers and trade unions through more structured consultation and engagement. A refocus on gender balance through the Citizens Assembly offers us the opportunity to examine the real issues and reinvigorate the work done to date. While there are a wealth of issues that need to be addressed, the brief for the focus of our recommendations means we will cover three key issues 1) identifying the gender pay gap; 2) addressing the causes of occupational segregation and 3) addressing stereotypes and gender norms including those surrounding care.

1. Gender pay gap reporting

Research tells us that the roots of a gender gap in pay are multiple and nuanced. The difference is not just caused at an organisation level but is symptomatic of how we think of men, women and gender. There are several complex issues that typically lead to a gender pay gap which have been well researched and often these causes are interrelated.

The gender pay gap calculates the difference in the average hourly wages of men and women across a workforce – it compares the pay of all working men and all working women; not just those in same jobs, with the same working patterns or the same competencies, qualifications or experience. It does not indicate discrimination or bias, or even an absence of equal pay for equal value work – but it does report a gender representation gap – so for example if women hold more of the lower paid jobs in the organisation than men, and men hold more of the senior roles which are higher paid, the gender pay gap is usually bigger.

To tackle the causes of the gender pay gap, policy development must consider how women and men participate in the labour market, including pre-labour market areas such as education and skills acquisition, and how this impacts on their labour market experience and outcomes. In addition to equality, this issue has implications for economic growth and competitiveness, not least because women represent more than 50% of the population and 60% of third level graduates but also when

considered in tandem with the significant benefits for innovation, creativity, decision-making and governance.

Fundamental to solving a problem requires knowing where the problem exists and what is causing it. Therefore, we need to urgently progress the introduction of an appropriate model of gender pay gap reporting. This should start with large organisations and cascade over time to smaller employers so that they can learn from the best practice experiences before having to report.

Gender pay gap reporting alone will not identify or solve the myriad of structural, cultural and policy causes for the differences in participation rates and the employment gaps between the genders. But gender pay gap reporting has the potential to offer a real diagnostic tool to highlight the particular issues facing distinct organisations, sectors and regions alike to enable more targeted interventions by all stakeholders including employers.

Recommendation 1: Introduce an appropriate model of gender pay gap reporting in Ireland as a matter of urgency, starting with organisations with over 250+ employees before cascading it down to employers of 150+ employees and 50+ employees in due course.

2. Addressing the causes of a gender segregated labour market

The second issue and one of the main causes of the gender pay gap is occupational segregation, where certain genders are over-represented in certain roles or occupations. Women dominate occupations like education, health and caring professions while men dominate technology and engineering professions, and more men than women are present in senior executive and leadership roles. There is a wealth of research which says occupational segregation limits employment choices, access to higher level jobs and facilitates the undervaluation of female-dominated occupations.

The roots of this gendered segregation lie in the education system and our culture. It stems from the way in which children are introduced to learning and opportunities which socialises children into an expectation of certain roles as “women’s work” or “men’s work” and into the roles men and women often assume around caring responsibilities. While employers have an important role in enabling greater gender balance in their organisations, the challenge is heightened when the pipeline is leaking from such an early stage.

Schools, and in particular single sex schools, often fail to offer “gendered” subjects such as physics or mechanical drawing in girl’s schools or home economics in boys’ schools or timetables can be created which pitch gendered subjects against each other. Furthermore, guidance often seems to be deficient in bridging the knowledge gap for career choices and new perspectives for boys and girls and fails to encourage graduates to consider gender atypical sectors and occupations. This can result in career decisions being narrowed at an early stage for students. As a result, while girls tend to outperform boys in education, they may choose subjects that lead to them being concentrated in gendered sectors offering narrower scope for higher earnings in later life. The OECD suggest that the low proportion of women in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) fields of study and employment causes a real issue, because graduates of these fields are in high demand and as a result the related jobs tend to be highly paid. This occupational segregation thus lends itself to a gender pay gap.

There is a need to challenge occupational stereotypes by encouraging more women into male dominated industries and investing in careers advice that provides real information and options to students. This means building an awareness of gender stereotyping into teacher training curricula. Studies from the US and Sweden have shown the impact that norm-conscious or gender-neutral teaching practices can have on changing children's gender stereotyping behaviours which start as young as age five or six. We need to ensure that key influencers such as teachers, career guidance teachers and parents are aware of the career paths and options in gender atypical areas.

Recommendation 2: Significant interventions are required in the education system and teacher training curricula to address subject availability; career choice; gender stereotyping and role modelling.

3. Addressing stereotypes and gender norms including those surrounding care.

A societal focus on the role of gender stereotypes and norms which influence the roles women and men hold in our country needs to occur if we are to further challenge the work and non-work opportunities available to all. One particularly strong stereotype surrounds the issue of care and during this pandemic, existing issues have been heightened further.

The role of women and men in care work, whether child or elder care, and the division of unpaid work in the home has a significant impact on work, pay and working arrangements. The issues are threefold:

- 1) Family, care and domestic responsibilities are not equally shared. Women's ability to participate in the labour market is constrained by the fact that they spend more time on unpaid work, four times as much on care work and twice as much time on household work than men, making them less available for paid work.

- 2) Ireland does not have an affordable, quality childcare provision with an appropriate funding model. This means that often one parent, usually the mother, has to reduce their hours or leave the workplace for a period of time to offset the prohibitive costs. This adds up to less experience, reduced benefits value (pensions/bonuses which are usually linked as a percentage of basic salary) and therefore can generate an earnings gap that is greater than their male counterparts. While working part-time can reflect personal choices, the high share of female part-time employment may also stem from constraints, including family and care-related reasons. Over time the career gap can extend and a "motherhood penalty" can occur due to interrupted employment, loss of experience and salary increments that would be gained while in employment. These can contribute to a gender pay gap and a lack of gender balance in decision-making roles.

- 3) Challenges too need to be made around assumptions about men and women and care both in organisations and society. Traditional stereotypes encourage the belief that upon motherhood, women are not as ambitious, available or committed to their career. Similar assumptions are made about men's lack of interest in being involved in caring for their child and the uptake of paternity and parental leave somewhat reflects that issue. We need to challenge this and make it fully acceptable for work and care to co-exist without judgements being made on either men or women.

To address the care issue will require business and society to stop seeing this as a women's issue and rather to see it as an issue that affects all of society and requires a fundamental change in how we think of men, women and gender. Culture change is needed to see greater balance between the number of men involved in child and elder care, making use of parental leave and paternity leave that is provided for in Irish legislation, and the acceptability of that in both organisations and society. It is necessary to consider both men and women as having caring responsibilities and not see this as an obstacle to career progression.

Recommendation 3: Implement an integrated cross departmental approach in collaboration with business to address the barriers preventing women fully participating in employment and contributing to gender pay gaps. This would need to address structural issues like childcare, sharing of parent related leave, supporting returners to the workplace and challenging gender stereotypes and norms built into policies and procedures.

Recommendation 4: Reform the funding model for childcare and school-age care in Ireland to remove a significant obstacle to the ability of women to participate fully in the labour market.

Recommendation 5: Promote the sharing of caring responsibilities by men and women by encouraging greater uptake of parental leave by men.

Conclusion

The business case for gender equality and gender balance is well established. While much has been achieved, momentum seems to have stalled in recent years. Greater gender parity yields stronger business results, higher quality decision making, enhanced innovation and creativity and has the potential to impact GDP. Addressing the gender pay gap and issues that contribute to it like occupational segregation, stereotypes and gender norms will accelerate necessary conversations and actions, facilitate greater participation of women in all facets of the workplace, and benefit individuals, families, business and society. Ibec look forward to engaging further in this work towards gender balance and supporting an Ireland that enables women and girls to fulfil their potential including in the workplace.

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