

Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality

Care, Work and Welfare: ICTU Key Recommendations

1. Recognition of Caring and Family Benefits

The Irish social welfare system is unusual in a European context in that payments are paid at a flat rate (typically of €203 or €245 per week), whereas payments in Continental and Nordic welfare systems are paid as a (high) percentage of a worker's weekly earnings.

Earnings related welfare payments ensure workers have an adequate replacement income to preserve their living standards when they experience interruptions in employment, such as job loss, sickness, maternity, retirement. Ireland's flat-rated system of welfare payments aims only to prevent poverty.

Two new welfare payments - Paternity Benefit (2018) and paid Parent's Leave (2019), have been introduced to support families in the more equal sharing of care responsibilities. However, uptake of these supports is disappointingly low. Only half of eligible men working in the private sector have availed of Paternity Benefit, compared to 92% uptake by women for Maternity Benefit.

A key driver to low uptake is the relatively low payment rate. That is, average weekly take-home pay in the private sector is over 2.5 times the Paternity Benefit payment - €642 compared to €245 per week. Unless an employer provides a salary-top, and there is no legal requirement on employers to do so, the average family will experience a big drop in their household income if both parents avail of maternity and paternity leave on top of the added expense a new baby brings.

To support all working parents to take family leave and the more equal sharing of care within families, ICTU recommends family benefits be paid as a percentage of earnings.

2. Recognition of Caring and the State Pension

Government introduced a Homemakers Scheme in 1996 to protect the future pension entitlement of people, overwhelmingly women, leaving the workforce to provide care. Each year caring is credited when calculating the size of their state pension, up to a maximum of 20 years.

However, in order to qualify for any contributory welfare payment, including the state pension, applicants must first have a minimum number of *paid* social insurance contributions. This ensures no one is awarded a contributory benefit based wholly on social insurance *credits*.

Since 2012, state pension applicants require 520 *paid* contributions to qualify i.e. have been in paid work for a minimum 10 years over their working life. Applicants before 2012 required only 260 paid contributions i.e. employed a minimum five years.

The 2012 doubling of the paid contribution requirement disqualified women who would previously have qualified for a (reduced) state pension based on their own insurance record. Applicants without sufficient paid contributions can instead apply for the non-contributory state pension, which is means-tested on both their and their spouse's income and capital. For women in high income or asset rich (e.g. farm) families, a more financially advantageous option is to apply as a dependent of their husband and be assessed on his insurance record.

The UK abandoned the paid contribution qualifying condition in 2010. That is, they no longer distinguish between paid contributions and credited contributions.

To support more women qualify for the state pension in their own right, instead of as a dependent, ICTU recommends Government abolishes the distinction between paid contributions from employment and credited contributions for caring.

3. Working from Home and Family Friendly Working Arrangements

Developments in technology have made it possible for many desk jobs to be performed outside of an employer's premises, for part or all of the working week.

This year, tens of thousands of businesses moved their staff to work remotely from home to help slow the spread of the coronavirus. For the vast majority of workers this was their first experience of working from home, and many have expressed an interest to continue remote working on a permanent basis.

When implemented in the right way, working from home can really improve workers' work-life balance, make them happier and more productive.

However, unlike workers across the EU, in the UK and Northern Ireland, Irish workers have no legal right to flexible working arrangements, such flexi-time, part-time hours, job-share and working from home. Under current law flexible and remote working is solely at the discretion of the employer.

A 2019 EU Directive on Work-Life Balance will give carers and parents with children up to eight years old a right to request flexible work. Limiting this right to these two groups risks the expected shift to working from home becoming highly feminised, which would have negative consequences for women's career progression.

The need for flexibility must be balanced with the needs of the business. Not all jobs can be done from home. What the new workers' right to request flexible working does is require bosses to give requests for flexible working reasonable consideration.

To support all workers to reconcile work and care commitments and greater gender balance in flexible and remote working, Congress recommends Government extend the new legal right to request flexible working arrangements to every worker.

Key Recommendations



- To support all working parents take family leave & a more equal sharing of care:
 - Pay family benefits as a percentage of earnings.
- To support more women qualify for the state pension in their own right:
 - Abolish the distinction between paid and credited contributions.
- To support all workers reconcile work and care commitments and gender balance in flexible work arrangements:
 - Extend the new legal right to request flexible working to every worker.