

INOU KEY POINTS TO THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON GENDER EQUALITY

- A Public Employment Service that is open to and available to everyone of working age who wishes to avail of the service - this would ensure that women who are not in receipt of a social welfare payment could access the PES.
- Work in partnership with the person using the service, identify and meet their needs in a meaningful way, including how to access affordable childcare.
- Set social welfare payments at a level that lifts people above the poverty line; and supports them to meet a Minimum Essential Standard of Living. Gender equality is unattainable if struggling to make ends meet remains a key issue for so many women and men.
- www.inou.ie





CURRENT CONTEXT

On November 17th the Central Statistics Office (CSO) published the Labour Force Survey (LFS) for the third quarter of 2020, which covers the months July to September. This release includes information using the International Labour Organisation standard methodology, alongside estimated figures taking into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Irish labour market.

In Q3 2020, 174,700 people were unemployed: 46,700 more people than in Q3 2019. The unemployment rate was 7.1%, a figure last seen in Q1 2017. At that time the female unemployment rate was 6.8% and the male 7.3%. While in the most recent quarter this situation is reversed, with the female unemployment rate at 7.6% and the male at 6.7%.

The number of people deemed long-term unemployed in Q3 2020 was 34,600 and the long-term unemployment rate was 1.4%, these figures are very similar to Q3 2019. Looking at the numbers of people who are long-term unemployed: a year ago men accounted for 68%, while in Q3 2020 women account for 50.3%.

When COVID-19 is factored in the estimated number of people unemployed in September becomes 394,538, and the unemployment rate 15.9%. Women account for 47% of this figure and their unemployment rate is 16.1%. Ireland moved to Level 5 restrictions in October, and the COVID-19 Adjusted Measure of Unemployment is estimated as 501,640 with an unemployment rate of 20.2%. Women accounted for 49% of this figure and their unemployment rate is 21.7%.

IRELAND NEEDS AN INCLUSIVE PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

In late 2011 the Department of Social Protection absorbed the employment services and programmes previously run by FAS. In response to the 2008 financial crisis, the surge in unemployment and external criticism of the passivity of Ireland's social protection and employment services, a stronger focus on activation was introduced.

The Department of Social Protection's overall objective is *"To continue putting our clients at the centre of all our operations, providing an efficient and effective service and to continue developing our staff, structures and processes."*

This is a good objective, but issues arise for people who need access to the services under the Department's remit but have difficulties accessing them as they are not in receipt of a social welfare payment themselves i.e. they are not a client.

This is a particular issue for **women who are not in the labour force**, who maybe a Qualified Adult on their partner's welfare payment. Feedback to the INOU highlights the particular difficulties facing women who are not on a Jobseeker's payment themselves gaining access to the Public Employment Service. Concerns have been raised that women seeking to return to the labour market can only receive targeted supports through specific programmes, which can



be very welcome but are invariably only available in certain areas. Access to mainstream services must also be made available as a matter of course, and these services must develop their capacity to engage appropriately with women returning to the labour market.

To achieve this the policy focus and delivery on the ground must move away from activation, which tends to focus on reducing the numbers of people on the Live Register¹, to one of delivering a fully accessible and inclusive Public Employment Service.

In June 2019, the INOU published "*Building a Quality Public Employment Service*" which built on the organisation's work of exploring unemployed people's experiences of the Intreo model as delivered by the Department of Social Protection; the Local Employment Service; and JobPath providers. In the document we noted the importance of achieving a **Public Employment Service** "*that is open to and available to everyone of working age who wishes to avail of the service*".

Amongst the key values and principles we noted the importance of:

- Belief in the potential and capacity of the person;
- Respect and dignity;
- Informed choice;
- Working in partnership with person using the service;
- Working in partnership with other organisations, including education and training providers and a range of community and statutory support agencies;
- Actively promoting equality and social inclusion; and that
- a quality PES would be enabled by: an ethos of continuous professional development; effective recruitment; and good management.

WELFARE ISSUES

On October 27th, 2020, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) published the Survey on Income and Living Conditions, SILC, for 2019. SILC is a household survey that captures information on a range of income and social transfers.

Amongst the data produced by SILC are **key national poverty indicators** including the 'at-risk-of-poverty' rate; the deprivation rate; and the consistent poverty rate. In 2019 these figures were 12.8%; 17.8%; and 5.5% respectively.

However, for unemployed people these three indicators were considerably higher than the national figures. In 2019, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for people who were unemployed was 35.4%, the only group with a higher rate was people who are not at work due to illness or disability, at 37.5%.

¹ which captures the numbers of people in receipt of Jobseeker's Benefit (social insurance payment); Jobseeker's Allowance (means tested payment); and people signing-on for credits (particularly important for future access to a pension).



The deprivation rate for people who were unemployed was 36% in 2019. Two groups had a higher rate: again people not at work due to illness or disability at 43.3%; and people parenting alone with children aged less than 18 years, at 45.4%. The indicators for people, often women, who are parenting alone comes from the Household Composition breakdown of the SILC data, where one parent families' rates of poverty are considerably higher than other households.

The consistent poverty rate for people who are unemployed was 20.2% in 2019, the highest rate across any of the detailed data. The CSO also produce information on the 'number of persons at work in the household'. The poverty rates for households with no-one at work were considerably higher than other households with people at work. 'Jobless' households as they are sometimes called had an at-risk-of-poverty rate of 34.1%; a deprivation rate of 31.9%; and a consistent poverty rate of 17.3% in 2019.

Earlier this year the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* was published and its two key ambitions are:

- *To reduce the national consistent poverty rate to 2% or less of the population and,*
- *To make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive States in the EU.*

There are sixty-nine commitments listed in the Roadmap including commitment twenty-five which aims to: *"Consider and prepare a report for Government on the potential application of the benchmarking approach to other welfare payments."* (p9) It is absolutely critical that the benchmarks used in this work are: lifting people on social welfare payments **above the poverty line**; and supporting them to meet a **Minimum Essential Standard of Living**.

In the Programme for Government, under the Mission: A New Social Contract, it says that *"It will provide greater security for individuals and communities and will be founded on the principle of equality and ensuring that every citizen can achieve their full potential."* (p74)

For many people **employment programmes** can be an important access point to the labour market and an important resource to community-based organisations seeking to provide services and supports to their communities. It is vitally important that participation on these programmes is by choice and people can self-refer; that proper supports for participation are put in place including affordable and accessible childcare and transport; and that people truly experience these programmes as a steppingstone into decent and sustainable employment.

A concern for the INOU's General Branch, the mechanism through which unemployed people play an active role in the organisation's work, is the lack of opportunities for participation open to people who are **signing on for credits**. 70% of those signing-on for credits are women. The organisation is also concerned at recent changes made to how these credits will be accruable over a person's lifetime, and the impact it will have on the pension they will be able to access.

In *Our Shared Future* the Government notes that *"This is a Programme to recover our economy, rebuild our society, renew our communities, and respond to the challenges we face both nationally and internationally. This will be a Government of enterprise, creating new jobs,*



preparing for the jobs of the future, driving our economic recovery, and improving the quality of life for all our people.” (p6)

It will be absolutely critical that there is a **strong equality and social inclusion focus** to this work. In particular as Ireland seeks to find its way out of the current health crisis and its impact on the labour market, that sight is not lost of those whose employment and unemployment statistics are invariably in marked contrast to the national ones. For instance the exclusion facing people, which can be particularly stark for women who have a disability, are members of the Traveller and Roma communities, are parenting alone, live in households with little or no connection to the labour market. Ageism is another issue that must be properly addressed. It is one that both female and male individual members of the INOU have raised: the difficulties of getting back into paid employment. Female individual members have advised of additional concerns how invisible older women can become; the presumption of others that they are then available to take on caring roles, which they may prefer not to undertake if they had an alternative choice.

Housing is an issue that throws up many serious challenges at both the personal and societal levels. For example, families where both parents play an active part in the caring of their children but no longer live together. The parent who is not deemed the primary carer and who needs housing support, can find it very difficult to access appropriate accommodation to have their children with them at designated times. This person, often though not always the father, is viewed as a single person by the state bodies providing housing support, even though another state body, the Courts, may have an expectation that the parent will fulfil their duties. It will be difficult to achieve gender equality in Ireland if caring responsibilities are not properly shared, this work must be recognised and supported by the State, and the State's different policies, services and supports must work together to achieve this outcome.

IRISH NATIONAL ORGANISATION OF THE UNEMPLOYED

“The INOU is a federation of unemployed people, unemployed centres, unemployed groups, community organisations and Trade Unions. The INOU represents and defends the rights and interests of those who want decent employment and cannot obtain it. We promote and campaign for policies to achieve full employment for all. We also campaign for an acceptable standard of living for unemployed people and their dependents. The INOU is an anti-sectarian, anti-racist, non-party political organisation which promotes equality of opportunity within society.” (INOUE Mission Statement)

The organisation has over 200 affiliated organisations and individual members. We work at the local and national level on issues affecting unemployed people through the provision of training and welfare rights information services; analysis of Government policies and related advocacy work; and working with a wide range of other organisations on issues of common concern. Further information is available at www.inou.ie