



# The National Women's Strategy 2017-2020

## Submission by Longford Women's Link

### Introduction

#### Longford Women's Link

Longford Women's Link (LWL), a dynamic social enterprise which celebrates its 22<sup>nd</sup> anniversary in 2017, links women with the resources to make their community safe and equal. LWL identifies and addresses key inequalities that prevent women in Longford achieving their full social/economic potential and our work provides real and tangible opportunities for women and their families. Services provided to approximately 700 women and 170 children in Longford/Midlands (2016) enabled women to access a wide range of programmes and supports yielding real benefits for their families and the wider community. We provide women-centred services (Education, Training, Group Support, Childcare, Domestic Violence, Counselling, Female Entrepreneurship, capacity-building and local/national advocacy). Key to the delivery of our services is our unique model of Integrated Service Delivery (ISD).

#### LWL Submission Outline

LWL welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the National Women's Strategy 2017-2020. Our attendance at the public consultation meetings also afforded us the opportunity to discuss relevant issues pertaining to women's equality, not only with our counterparts in the sector but also with Minister Fitzgerald herself and this is appreciated.

We have structured our submission so that firstly it provides the background to our experience as a women's organisation working in a rural area. We will then address each of the High-Level Objectives in turn and provide a comment on the measures which are to be incorporated (which we believe are most relevant to our work as a grassroots women's organisation) as well as proposing enhancements or additional measures.

### Gender Equality in Rural Ireland

Women in rural Ireland share many commonalities with their urban counterparts, however there are significant differences in terms of access to services, experiences of social exclusion and disadvantage and opportunities for economic independence. The recognition of different needs according to levels of disadvantage and/or geographic location is critical e.g. a rural woman experiencing economic disadvantage and social isolation will have very different needs to those living in urban areas. As outlined in the CEDRA report:

*rural areas have lower skill levels in the labour market, reflecting the types of employment sectors traditionally found in these areas with this trend even more pronounced in the most peripheral areas' (CEDRA Research Report, 2014, p.148).*

Already we have seen that women as a target group have been excluded from the new SICAP. This is despite all of the evidence within the sector that targeted funding and supports are needed for disadvantaged and marginalised women within our communities. Under the 2013 local government reform



process, many groups, including LWL lost their LCDP funding which was used to deliver on the very elements outlined in this new support scheme – social inclusion, poverty and equality. In addition, LWL, throughout its 22 years in existence have identified key barriers to women’s full participation in society, specifically experienced by women in Longford. These include rural isolation, experience of domestic violence, lack of access to childcare and transport and lack of third level opportunities in Longford.

### Case Study - Longford

To give just one example of what can constitute local factors and challenges for rural women – Longford is the most deprived local authority area within the Midlands region (Trutz Haase, 2013). The county was severely affected by the economic downturn, reflected in the drop in the absolute deprivation score from -4.9 in 2006 to -12.1 in 2011 and is the fourth most disadvantaged local authority area in Ireland. Critically, Longford is the only county in Ireland where the female unemployment rate actually rose during the Celtic Tiger Years - the female unemployment rate almost doubled between 2006 and 2011, reaching 21.0% (Trutz Haase, 2013) and has seen very little government investment (just one IDA visit within the last five years. 23% of families in Longford are lone mothers with children (CSO 2011) however areas such as Longford No. 1 Urban (44.8%) and Killashee (43.6%) have rates which are extremely high by national comparison.

## High Level Objectives

### 1. Advance Socio-economic Equality for Women and Girls

LWL welcomes the measures outlined in the NWS Consultation document. We have chosen specific measures relevant to our organisation on which to comment/make additional recommendations.

#### ***Investment in Childcare/Family Life***

*We will empower women to ensure that households headed by women are no longer at a higher risk of poverty. We will take measures to reduce the gender pay gap - inclusive of increasing investment in childcare, and reviewing the lower pay of women and gender inequality for senior appointments.*

LWL believes that increased investment in childcare is a very positive step. In relation to childcare, the high cost for families in Ireland has a significant impact on women’s ability to access employment and career progression. The European Commission has identified ‘limited access to affordable and quality childcare’ as ‘a barrier to increased female labour market participation’ (OECD, 2014). Significantly, as a percentage of family income, Ireland has the highest childcare costs in the European Union with low income families (including lone parents) incurring childcare costs of up to 40 per cent of their total income. However, we argue that the measures do not go far enough to address the barriers and issues faced by women in the workplace. With particular reference to the childcare sector, it is critical that increased investment in childcare focuses on the sector as a whole, including pay and conditions for Early Years Educators. There are many issues that impact on the successful advancement of the childcare sector, not least of which is the need for well-qualified staff who are properly remunerated. Low pay and poor conditions in the childcare sector are significant barriers to recruiting and retaining staff and therefore investment in the sector must look beyond subvention and focus on supporting sustainable business models which will in turn allow the



sector to develop sufficiently. The 2017 pre-budget submission from Early Childhood Ireland outlines the pay-related issues very clearly:

*Of the nearly 25,000 childcare workers, over 3,370, almost 14% of the total workforce, had to sign on the live register in the summer of 2014, a cost of €7.2 million to the exchequer (Pobal, 2014). In the ECI Survey Pay Rates in the Irish Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (January 2016) we found that the average rate of pay for an Early Years educator in Ireland is €10.27 per hour. Accordingly, an Early Years educator working in a pre-school service operating a single ECCE session will earn as little as €5,854 per annum and an Early Years educator working in a pre-school service running two ECCE sessions per day will only earn €11,707 - (Early Childhood Ireland, 2016).*

LWL also welcomes the measure in relation to parental and paternity leave however we argue that there needs to be an increase in options available to both parents in relation to parental leave to ensure that caring is not seen as being primarily the responsibility of women. In spite of our equality legislation relating to gender equality, cultural and societal norms still dictate that women undertake the majority (70%) of care work in Ireland (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015).

### **State Pension for Women**

The legacy of the Marriage Bar and a poorly designed system has resulted in a pension pay gap for women of 37% which is the fifth highest in the EU (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2015). Caring responsibilities and breaks in employment have all impacted women's ability to access an adequate income in their later years. In addition, the reduction in pay and pension levels in the public sector for education and health care during the economic crisis had a disproportionate effect on women who make up the majority of employees within those sectors (Tasc, 2016). The changes to the eligibility criteria for the state pension, implemented in 2012, have also had a significant and disproportionate impact on women (Age Action Ireland, 2017). These anomalies must be addressed if true socio-economic equality is to be achieved for women.

### **Women Parenting Alone**

As stated above, certain areas in Longford have higher than average rates of women parenting alone. Lone parents remain particularly vulnerable to poverty, with just over 27% of lone parent households recorded as in consistent poverty in 2006. In fact those in receipt of One Parent Family Payment have the highest rate of consistent poverty among all social welfare recipients and have fallen further and further behind income trends for the rest of the population. The reasons behind poverty are complex but one of the main reasons behind lone parent poverty is that welfare to work supports were designed for unemployed people and simply extended to lone parents without any adaptation to take account of the specific needs of one parent families. Those living in lone parent households experience the highest rates of deprivation with almost 56% of individuals from these households experiencing one form of deprivation (EU-SILC 2011). Lone parents who wish to avail of education and training opportunities at LWL face additional barriers of childcare and transport facilities and rural isolation for those living outside urban centres. LWL argues that these additional factors must be taken into account when implementing education/employment programmes.



## ***Entrepreneurship and Employment***

*Seek to promote locally delivered courses for women, comprising a series of training opportunities on self-development and work related skills, to assist a return to the labour market and promote entrepreneurship.*

This is a welcome measure however LWL believes that targeted initiatives are required which are adaptable to the needs of specific areas and groups. There is a tendency for Government policies to adopt a 'one size fits all' approach to labour market and education initiatives which simply do not translate when applied to women in rural areas. Access to education is another critical issue for rural women. For example, female educational attainment rates in Longford are low (only 29% of females in the county have completed third level – CSO, 2011). Overall, the proportion of adults with third-level education in County Longford is the second lowest in Ireland (Trutz Haase, 2013). Interestingly, a 2013 UCD study found that it is the education levels of the mother, not her marital or cohabitation status that has the most significant impact on the well-being of the child (UCD, 2013). Indeed, the fact that 'transaction costs' such as travel are likely to increase in line with the distance to a third level institution means that there is a reduced possibility of students from these areas attending third level institutions (Speiss and Wrohlich, 2010). As the barriers to participation (childcare, transport, course fees) are often not considered LWL recommends targeted support for established community education providers to deliver quality third level programmes within their regions. Many of LWL's potential learners are women who wish to return to education but are not entitled to any state supports in relation to fees by virtue of the fact that they have worked in the home. Even those who are entitled to fee support experience significant barriers in terms of physical access to third level institutions. LWL has been an outreach provider for a number of third level institutions throughout its history but investment is needed to support women to access third level education in their own areas in the absence of an institution in their locality.

Given LWL's strong track record in delivering Female Entrepreneurship Programmes, the promotion of entrepreneurship is also welcome. LWL has a long history of developing and implementing innovative programmes which support and promote Female Entrepreneurship in our community. Our experience is very varied – from female entrepreneurship mentoring programmes (under the previous EWM Programme 2010-2013) to tailor-made, gender specific courses for female entrepreneurs (our most recent programme was supported by the Ulster Bank Community Impact Fund in collaboration with the Ulster Bank and Longford Local Enterprise Office). All our previous evaluations point to the same conclusion – gender inequality in the field of entrepreneurship is a complex issue and cannot be adequately addressed by one intervention. Therefore the mechanics of the above measure within the NWS must be specifically outlined and investment provided if female entrepreneurs are to receive sufficient supports. We note that the recently launched '*Realising our Rural Potential*' by the DAHRRGA includes as one of its actions:

*As part of the EU Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020, roll out the women's entrepreneurship initiative to promote female entrepreneurship and develop their entrepreneurial capabilities.*

However we believe that this is somewhat misleading as the initiative referred to above was not promoted on the basis of rural need (and indeed a number of the successful applicants were in fact, urban-based) and are therefore requesting that measures within the NWS are not duplicated to the same extent. LWL recommends the establishment of a national investment programme for female entrepreneurship through Enterprise Ireland that goes beyond mentoring (although we acknowledge that this is a very important element).



**Note: We believe that Objective 4 should be renamed: 'Advance Women in Leadership and Entrepreneurship'**

Below are three case studies from LWL highlighting the importance of supporting education initiatives at community level. The LWL Women's Community Education Centre, which opened in 2011, provides education and training to approximately 300 students annually and is a QQI centre providing general learning, IT and childcare courses from QQI Levels 3 to 6. In 2014, LWL became the lead sponsor for the countywide Community Employment Childcare Scheme in Longford which provides a 3-year training and work experience CE programme to participants in the county during which they complete their QQI Level 5 and many progress to Level 6. This programme is open to applicants from the age of 21 and with an average progression rate of 70% into employment/education, is a real opportunity for meaningful training and experience in the childcare sector. Having provided third level outreach for many years via UCD and NUI Maynooth, LWL entered into a new collaboration in 2016 with IT Carlow for the provision of its Level 8 Honours Degree in Childcare with 29 students registering in September 2016. LWL is also a community partner of An Cosán's Virtual Community College which allows students to access learning virtually – four Special Purpose Awards (QQI Level 7) have been delivered to date in this way.

**Case Studies – Women's Community Education at LWL**

**Elaine Burke - Early Years Educator (DSP CE Scheme)**

Elaine Burke is a young participant who lives in Granard and returning to education has really increased her confidence through her training and practical work experience. LWL has also given her the opportunity to complete her QQI Level 6 in Childcare, which up until recently, would have been impossible both from a financial and geographical perspective as there was no QQI Level 6 Childcare running in her locality. This is where LWL as a community provider really supports the learning needs of the individual in supporting them to develop their careers and achieve economic independence.

**Elaine's story:**

*My name is Elaine Burke I am 28years old and I am currently on my final year on the community employment scheme run by Longford Women's Link. I live in Granard town located in the north of Longford, before becoming a member of this great scheme my hopes to complete my Level 6 in childcare was very limited.*

*Upon joining this scheme I got a work placement in my local community crèche, walking distance from my home as I don't drive and this gave me the opportunity to join the working community and experience my dream of working with children.*

*This scheme later offered me the opportunity to join a QQI Level 6 course that takes place in the evenings allowing me to educate myself and work first hand with children. The course takes place in the Longford Women's Link centre & this scheme gave me an allowance to ensure I had help with travel expenses, this gave me a great determination to miss little or no classes. Joining this course I had the bonus of having two friends and work colleagues join the same course. The tutors are so helpful and the other girls in the class have become great friends of mine.*

*My supervisor is always there and always willing to help in any way she could. Any problems and she was just a phone call away, always encouraging me to go further and making frequent visits to see how we are getting on. She may be my boss/supervisor but I will forever see her as a friend.*



*I will be forever thankful to everyone at & associated with Longford Women's Link, it is a great organisation helping and empowering women to succeed in life.*

### **Catherine Conboy – Early Years Educator (DSP CE Scheme)**

Catherine Conboy who is a childcare assistant in Drumlish is a CE participant currently completing her QQI Level 5 in childcare. Catherine is always singing the praises of returning to education in the area of childcare as it is an area she would previously never have considered. Catherine lives in Ballinamuck in rural Longford and is a mother of four children. Participating on CE has given her the opportunity to learn and gain practical experience on a part-time basis suiting both the needs of her family and her location.

#### **Catherine's story:**

*I am a typical mother of four young boys. Previous to having my boys I worked in the banking field for many years. When I was having my children I took time out of my career to concentrate on my children. About two and a half years ago I felt that I needed to get back out into the working environment and better myself. I discovered that I had a chance to enter the working environment through a childcare CE scheme. I decided to give it a go. I will not lie and say I was confident in starting this career but I was the opposite I was so nervous.*

*After a few months into my childcare experience I began to enjoy it more and more. When I started my Level 5 course in childcare I was nervous as I would say to myself can I really do this? When I got used to going to my night classes I began to enjoy the whole experience. I had to juggle family life with school but I did it because I began to really enjoy all the positives that the modules I was completing had to offer. After a while I began to attend night classes twice a week, I know some people did not like this but I always looked at the positive side of things, and I completed my level five in half the time, which I know was difficult but it was quite rewarding. Longford Women's Link centre has offered me the chance to get educated into a different line of work and I have to say I'm loving it. The teachers within the centre offer valuable education and training to people and for me they gave me the knowledge I need to progress with my childcare. I feel that my teachers within the centre were more like my friends rather than the typical teacher at the top of the classroom. My teachers helped me through my Level 5 training and I think their friendly approach to teaching gave me the confidence, which in turn helped me progress successfully with my exams.*

*I would recommend childcare Level 5 to anyone as it will teach you a lot about child development in general and it will give you the confidence to further your career prospects.*

*I am really looking forward to going back to school to complete my Level 6 and who knows where this will take me. I may go on and eventually complete my first ever degree....watch this space!!!!*

### **Kathleen Dowd – DSP CE Supervisor, LWL**

*My name is Kathleen Dowd and I work at Longford Women's Link as a Community Employment Supervisor. I commenced this role in 2005, at this point the scheme was mainly hands on childcare focused, consisting of 18 participants. Part of my role involved managing a significant training budget and ensuring it was utilised efficiently for the overall benefit of the participants. From working closely with the participants I quickly identified the need for training and professional development. I set about fostering an environment that placed value and desire to educate and progress in the area of childcare. Throughout my journey as a Community Employment Supervisor I immersed myself in the childcare sector becoming very familiar with current regulations, legal requirements training requirements such as FETAC and then QQI. I*



*naturally found myself promoting childcare not only as a career opportunity but also an educational choice. As a result of the success of this Scheme in 2014 Longford Women's Link became the lead sponsor for the Childcare Programme for County Longford. This meant an increase to 83 participants.*

*My own experience of education was positive but because of financial barriers I did not get the opportunity to continue to third level after completing the Leaving Certificate. After finishing school I gained employment in local factories, which was common in the 1990s but with the closure of the factory where I worked in 2003 I took the decision to return to education and completed a FETAC Level 5 Business Course and also a Level 5 Domestic Violence Advocacy Course. I went on to receive a Certificate in Front Line Management from NCI and a Diploma in Women's Studies from UCD through an outreach programme run in Longford Women's Link. I am still studying in Longford Women's Link and have completed a QQI Special Purpose Awards at Level 7 An Cosán's Virtual Community College in conjunction with Carlow IT– an online e-learning platform and am now enrolled on the IT Carlow Level 8 Honours Degree in Childcare. I am truly enjoying the experience and opportunities available at LWL.*

## 2. Improve women's and girls' physical and mental health

### **Primary Care**

The measures outlined in the NWS Consultation Document are most welcome. However in relation to primary care, LWL believes it is critical that out of hours services are implemented as a matter of urgency. This is particularly important from young women/girls in relation to mental health issues and issues concerning sexual health. We would also argue that investment in primary care centres is also urgently required to facilitate mental health assessments.

### **Mental Health Services**

As a provider of services to women and their families, LWL wishes to highlight the lack of mental health services for women and to outline the fact that the requirement to access addiction services and mental health services separately casus significant issues and exacerbates already critical mental health issues. From the perspective of homelessness, LWL Domestic Violence Service have long been advocating for a dual diagnosis approach to mental health and addiction. This is particularly important in rural areas where services are more sparse and harder to access.

### **Gender-Based Violence**

The NWS Consultation Document includes the following measure: *'We will implement in full the Istanbul Convention on tackling Domestic Violence and the commitments contained in the recently published Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence'*. **LWL welcomes this commitment however we argue that the issue of Gender-Based Violence needs a designated High Level Objective of its own.** Within this additional Objective, we argue that increased investment and support is needed for local and regional agencies who work closely with women and children experiencing domestic abuse. We are also advocating for specific measures in relation to housing and accommodation for women in abusive relationships. Our own statistical analyses within our service indicate that while the numbers accessing our service are remaining somewhat static, the incidences of accompaniment to both the courts and the Gardaí have risen dramatically (78 court and five Garda accompaniments in 2014 rising



to 141 court and 48 Garda accompaniments in 2016). These figures suggest that an increasing number of women are seeking help from the legal and justice systems because the option of leaving and finding alternative accommodation is unavailable. According to SAFE Ireland National Social Change Agency, 2016 saw almost 5000 women and children refused emergency refuge spaces due to over-crowding. Locally, women who access Longford and Westmeath emergency accommodation find that it takes anywhere from nine to 18 months to secure rental accommodation roughly in line with the rental caps. Therefore LWL recommends that housing programmes make specific provision for victims of domestic violence as a vulnerable category of homeless clients as well providing out of office responses to emergency housing needs and maintaining an adequate supply of emergency accommodation for women and their families.

Domestic Violence is a key factor in preventing full and equal participation of rural women in their communities. LWL Domestic Violence Service supported 311 women in 2016 which equated to 4,354 individual contacts provided by one full-time and three part-time members of staff with a very limited programme budget. These levels of support are not sustainable in the long term.

### **3. Promote Women's and Girls' Equal and Active Citizenship**

LWL welcomes the commitment to the measures included in the Consultation Document.

#### ***Participation in Local Decision-Making***

We argue that barriers to accessing both local and national decision-making structures are critical factors in preventing full and equal participation of rural women in their communities. LWL's Women's Manifesto Programme is a unique model of local democratic participation which aims to support women in Longford and other counties to play an active and meaningful role in their local decision-making structures. We urge the Department to examine our model and consider investing in it as a means of supporting women to play a full and meaningful part in their communities.

#### ***Gender Quotas for Candidate Selection***

LWL welcomed the introduction of gender quotas for candidate selection at national level however we believe that the research on this issue, and the outcomes for female candidates at GE16 (increase from 16.3% representation in 2011 to 22% in 2016) supports the call for quotas for candidate selection to also be applied at local level. Women still account for just one in five out of every county and city councillor in Ireland, well below the EU average of 32%.

#### ***Gender Equality on Decision-Making Structures at Local Level***

LWL plays an active role at all levels of local decision-making in Longford and is represented on the LCDC, all SPCs and the PPN. We are concerned at the lack of accountability in relation to gender balance on these committees and believe that the published guidelines in relation to achieving this balance are weak. We are asking that Local Authorities be accountable in relation to their achievements on the issue of gender balance and that all committees referenced above should have a minimum of 40% of either gender. Local Authorities must be asked to report on the gender balance of their committee and specifically outline the reasons why balance has not been achieved.



## 4. Advance Women in Leadership

While the two measures outlined in this Objective are to be welcomed, we believe that this Objective should be renamed: '**Advance Women in Leadership and Entrepreneurship**' (See comments under Objective 1)

## 5. Embed Gender Equality in Decision-making

See above comments on **Gender Equality in Decision-making** (Objective 3).

We also welcome the commitment to gender and equality proofing budget submissions and would also recommend the inclusion of specific monitoring measures. In addition, LWL recommend the following:

- Reinstatement of women as a target group under SICAP – LWL argues that the removal of women as a target group has been a significantly backward step. Women are already underrepresented at all levels of decision-making and reducing the budgets of women's organisations considerably weakens the voice of groups who defend and advocate for women's equality.
- Implementation of a comprehensive social impact assessment, including a specific gender impact assessment, prior to the implementation of all Local and Community Development policies. It is our experience that many women, especially in rural Ireland are reliant on the services provided by organisations in the Community and Voluntary Sector and therefore any reductions to these services has disproportionate impacts on women and their families.

## Sectoral comments

As outlined above, cuts to the budgets of women's organisations have had a lasting impact on the ability to provide much-needed services in neglected and disadvantaged areas as well as the ability to maximise the capacity of women and advocate for equality. LWL believes that the government must depart from its tendency to adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to policy and recognise the different needs and levels of disadvantage in urban and rural areas, including rural towns.

It is critical that the NWS provides an opportunity to acknowledge the value of the roles that women, and women's organisations, play in society and also, the value and benefit of ensuring equality in society. Commitment to engagement and collaboration requires resources, as does delivery of the work itself. The Government need to acknowledge the work of the sector and also recognise the significant voluntary contribution made by many of its citizens. The sector also needs acknowledgement for the role it plays in addressing social exclusion and inequality. Women's organisations are vastly underfunded in many areas and therefore LWL believes that the new NWS must make reference to government investment in the sector and therefore put meaningful and real supports behind its measures. LWL is recommending:

- The introduction of a specific national multi-annual grant-aid scheme for autonomous community development work specifically with marginalised and disadvantaged women. We believe that this could be implemented via the Department of Justice and Equality's Scheme to Support Women and would play a critical role in ensuring that women from all geographical areas have the opportunity to access services to maximise their potential and achieve economic independence for themselves and their families.



- Reinstatement of women as a target group under SICAP.
- Focus on rural poverty - The Irish Rural Link report on Rural Poverty: *Poverty and Social Inclusion - The Case for Rural Ireland* (Irish Rural Link, 2016), lays out starkly the specific issues that exist in rural Ireland. The Midlands region in particular is at a disproportionately high risk of poverty and social exclusion. Therefore LWL is advocating for a specific focus within the NWS on rural poverty e.g. rural isolation, poor employment opportunities, low income households and poor access to services. **Note: The chapter on equality in rural Ireland in the IRL report was authored by LWL.**

## Conclusion

LWL welcomes the opportunity to be part of the consultation process for the forthcoming National Women's Strategy 2017-2020. During the lifecycle of the last National Women's Strategy, LWL were involved in the NWS initiative 'Towards Gender Parity in Ireland' and made a presentation to the then Minister of the day (Minister Kathleen Lynch), on the issue of gender equality in local decision-making. LWL would be delighted to participate in any future initiatives/implementation strategies as deemed appropriate by the Department.

We believe that a strong NWS underpinned by meaningful investment is critical in addressing the various imbalances and inequalities as outlined both in the NWS Consultation Document and in our own submission. We urge the Department to incorporate the views of organisations like LWL who have taken the time both to attend the public consultations and make detailed submissions. We look forward to seeing the final strategy in place.

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