



Community Work Ireland working collectively to support and promote community work as a means of addressing poverty, social exclusion and inequality and advancing human rights

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Community Work Ireland Submission to the National Women's Strategy 2017 - 2020

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Introduction

Established in 1981¹ Community Work Ireland is the national organisation that promotes and supports community work/community development as a means of addressing poverty, social exclusion and inequalities. CWI is a membership organisation comprising over 800 individuals and organisations that support community work/community development and work in the most disadvantaged communities throughout Ireland. For over 35 years, Community Work Ireland has played an important role in working to advance policy and programmes that meet the real and pressing needs of disadvantaged communities throughout Ireland seeking to ensure the meaningful participation of communities in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

Nationally, CWI participates as an active member of the Community Platform² and through the Platform in the Community and Voluntary Pillar³. Internationally, CWI is the Irish representative on the European Community Development Network⁴ and the International Association for Community Development⁵. CWI is a member of the European Network against Racism Ireland⁶ and of the Refugee and Migrant Coalition⁷. CWI is a member of the Women's Human Rights Alliance⁸, the National Women's Council of Ireland⁹ and the Coalition to Repeal the Eighth Amendment. CWI supports a feminist approach to addressing women's inequality and discrimination.

As the leading community development organisation in the country whose members work with the most disadvantaged and socially excluded communities in Ireland, where women experience particular and multiple forms of social exclusion and inequality and play a crucial role in addressing the concerns of their communities, Community Work Ireland welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the forthcoming National Women's Strategy.

Community Work, Equality and Women's Human Rights

Community work or community development is an internationally recognised intervention to address disadvantage and marginalisation. It is defined as “a developmental activity comprised of both a task and a process”. The task is social change to achieve equality, social justice and human rights. The process is one of participation, empowerment and collective decision making in a structured and co-ordinated way. It is about the right and capacity of communities to have their voices heard. Community work is primarily a developmental activity that focuses on addressing the underlying causes of poverty, social exclusion and inequality and in organising collective action to address these issues. Community work/community development is based on the principles of participation, collectivity community empowerment, social justice & Sustainable development, human rights, equality & anti-discrimination¹. It is an approach to addressing significant social and economic issues for geographic or issue based communities that emphasises early intervention and the involvement, engagement and participation of those affected by these issues in the process of identifying needs and the development of strategies and projects to address these needs.

It requires a focus on identifying issues of the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities with the voice and participation of people directly experiencing these issues being central. Most crucially, in the current context outlined below, community development requires the identification by communities themselves of their own needs and of the most appropriate strategies needed to address the issues that affect them.

Community development involves promoting the rights of women in all their diversity, and advancing women's rights as a core priority, including addressing violence against women and the under-representation of women in all forms of decision making and policy making processes. It involves promoting the rights and voice of marginalised groups including Travellers, Roma, other minority ethnic groups, migrants, LGBTI people, older people and people with disability¹⁰ recognising the multiple barriers and forms of oppression and discrimination experienced in particular by women from these communities.

In Ireland, a significant grassroots community development infrastructure developed within rural, urban and issue based communities (of for example Travellers, women and migrants), supported in many instances by the State and by the European Union. However, in recent years this infrastructure has experienced significant cuts to resources and supports. In addition, the reconfiguration of the community sector has meant that many of the organisations that worked in and with the most disadvantaged communities were merged with the larger and more distant Local Development Companies.

Recommendations

CWI recommends

- The National Women's Strategy takes cognisance of and uses as its basis the UN Sustainable Development Goals towards the advancement of women's equality in a manner that promotes human rights, equality and sustainable development.
- That all actions and measures within the National Women's Strategy have at their core, an aim to address the needs and advance the collective human rights of the most disadvantaged and marginalised women in Ireland.
- A new national community development fund should be established to support autonomous community work with women.
- Specific interventions need to be designed and resourced to target marginalised and disadvantaged women, including those affected by poverty, inequality and discrimination. In addition, all mainstream interventions need to include disadvantaged and marginalised women in their target groups.

¹ All Ireland Standards for Community Work - <http://communityworkireland.ie/all-ireland-standards-for-community-work/>

Women in Local Development

Developments within the Local Development and Local Government sectors are significant steps and present a wide range of opportunities and challenges for women to engage meaningfully and have their voices heard in local participatory democratic processes and structures. The reform of local government, as laid out in the Local Government Reform Act 2014 following the conclusions of the policy paper Putting People First, envisages the development a “*coherent and integrated approach to local and community development*”. Key mechanisms for providing such coherence are set out in the Act and include the establishment by all local authorities of a Local and Community Development Committee and the development of Local Economic and Community Plans. The aim is to bring greater co-ordination on an area-basis to publicly-funded programmes and to oversee administration efficiencies across the local development landscape, while drawing on the capacity of local government and the experience, perspective and expertise of local and community actors in the relevant local authority area in programme delivery.

The above vision presents many challenges for the women’s sector throughout the country. The establishment of Public Participation Networks (PPNs) in each local authority area, with a focus on the community, voluntary, social inclusion and environmental sectors represent an important attempt by Government to ensure that local authorities consult with and promote effective participation of local communities in local government. Women, as those who engage most frequently with frontline services, play a key role in community development initiatives, and yet have the least power in relation to the decision-making processes that effect their lives. Funding and supports for autonomous community development work however has been significantly eroded and notwithstanding the funding that is available for a number of local women’s groups, many areas throughout the country lack the supports necessary for women to organise collectively to advance their rights.

It is imperative therefore that Local Authorities not only develop and implement clear policies and programmes in relation to core areas of importance to women but that these are developed in a way that ensures maximum input and meaningful participation of women, in particular those who are most marginalised from decision making processes.

Recommendations

CWI recommends

- That Local Economic and Community Plans should be gender proofed to assess their differential impact on women and on men.
- Gender balance on Local and Community Development Committees should be monitored and enforced. The responsibility for ensuring gender balance, should not rest only with the community and social inclusion sectors but with all sectors involved in the process.
- Guidance to local authorities from the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government on the operation of LCDCs and of Public Participation Networks should highlight and enforce the importance of a focus on promoting gender equality.
- The new Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme should specifically name disadvantaged women as a key target group and measures to address the needs of women incorporated into the programme.

The Eighth Amendment and Women’s Human Rights

The insertion, following the referendum in 1983, of the Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution equates the right to life of a foetus with that of a pregnant woman. It states, ‘The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right of the life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.’

It is the view of community work Ireland that, despite the democratically expressed wishes of the majority of those who voted in the 1983 referendum, the insertion of the eighth amendment represents a violation of the rights of women and a failure on the part of the State to protect the health, well-being and bodily integrity of women.

Ireland has the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe and one of the most restrictive in the world. Since 1983, a broad range of human rights monitoring bodies have highlighted Ireland's restrictive abortion legislation and its detrimental impact on women's lives and on the realisation of women's human rights including the Human Rights Committee the [Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#), the UN Committee Against Torture ([Concluding Observations](#))¹¹ and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women ([Concluding Comments](#)).

Community work Ireland recognises that while access to reproductive rights and abortion even in the most urgent and severe cases is extremely restricted for all women in Ireland, the reality of the experience of crisis and/or unwanted pregnancy for women who are poor, have low levels of education and lack of access to information, are unable to leave the country due to their residency status, or who do not have the necessary resources or physical ability to travel for abortion services elsewhere is far more traumatic and damaging.

Women are far more likely to be poor than men. Recession and austerity have had a disproportionate economic impact on women in Ireland. The Gender Pay Gap has widened from 12.6% to 14.4% while the Gender Pension Gap has widened from 35 to 37%. ESRI research has shown that women in couples suffered a 14% loss in income during the recession compared to 9% for men. A majority of low paid part time workers are women. Already vulnerable groups have suffered some of the worst impacts with 58% of lone parents, mostly women, experiencing deprivation¹².

Dozens of [migrant women](#) living in Ireland are unable to [access abortions abroad](#) as a result of "insurmountable" travel and legal [obstacles](#). The issue was the source of public controversy earlier this year when [Ms Y](#) – a young [asylum seeker](#) – unsuccessfully sought an abortion after arriving in Ireland pregnant as a result of alleged rape. While the Constitution guarantees the right to travel for abortion, many women cannot exercise this right due to an array of legal, social and economic barriers including women in poverty or on low income, young women, women with disabilities, women in State care, women experiencing domestic violence and women with travel restrictions many of whom are entitled to no more than a weekly allowance of €19.10 a week¹³.

For such women, accessing abortion services even in the most dire and dangerous of circumstances becomes a mountain which many simply do not have the resources to climb.

Recommendations

CWI recommends

- A referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, without replacement or amendment
- The removal of all criminal sanctions on women seeking and accessing abortion services in Ireland
- The removal of criminal sanctions on provision and performance of abortion in the Republic of Ireland
- The regulation of abortion services and medical professionals performing abortions through customary medical disciplinary procedures and general criminal law
- The enactment of legislation providing for access to abortion on a woman's request.

Violence against Women

Violence against women takes place in all communities throughout the world. In accepting that violence against women exists within disadvantaged communities is not to suggest that violence against women is determined by class, ethnicity or social status. The effects of violence however can be particularly traumatic for women living in geographically isolated areas, for women who are poor and for women from minority ethnic groups including Travellers. The cumulative effects of discrimination and oppression, poverty, isolation and poor environmental conditions are deeply damaging to women. When combined with physical, mental and emotional abuse the effects are enormous.

All forms of violence against women, domestic violence, sexual violence, sexual harassment, stalking, female genital mutilation require an integrated and targeted response. While recognising the existence of National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence, CWI believes that it is imperative that the new National Women's Strategy also takes cognisance of the vital necessity of addressing violence against women as a matter of urgency.

Recommendations

CWI recommends

- That the National Women's Strategy identifies Violence against Women in all its forms as a core violation of women's human rights and sets out a range of measures to address it.

Women in Rural Ireland

In a rural context, it has long been a concern for Community Work Ireland members, that much policy in relation to rural development, has focussed predominantly on economic development in isolation from social development, the advancement of equality and human rights and in particular an absence of commitments to the promotion of women's rights. Community Work Ireland members have noted that rural development policy has tended in the past to view rural populations as largely homogenous and has failed to recognise, resource and support the diversity that, while now growing, has always been a part of rural society. Migrants, Travellers, women, people with disability, carers, older people, young people, lone parents and other socially excluded members of rural populations are rarely named, rarely targeted and rarely prioritised in rural development policy and programmes. Yet all contribute to the development of Ireland's economy and to the social transformation of rural communities, both as active participants in the labour market and through family life and community activity.

Many women who live in rural areas are excluded, marginalised and 'invisible'. The White Paper on Rural Development committee said that 'the problems of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas have a distinct impact on women. Economic dependency, isolation, unequal opportunity and participation are compounded by the problems of distance from services and amenities. The absence of an adequate transport service and affordable childcare services in many areas make it difficult for women to avail of training and education or to enter into or retain employment.
<http://www.nwci.ie/download/pdf/ruraldevstrat06.pdf>

Lack of access to services, invisibility of rural poverty and lack of social networks and supports leave many groups of women in rural Ireland in a particularly vulnerable position. Violence against women, racism against Travellers, migrants and those with Irish citizenship, trafficking for forced labour and labour exploitation, loneliness, isolation, poverty, lack of options, lack of voice and powerlessness characterise the reality of the lives of thousands of women living in rural Ireland today.

Any measure to promote the advancement of women's rights must recognise and take concrete action to address the needs and concerns of women in rural Ireland

Recommendations

CWI recommends

- The National Women's Strategy supports the establishment of a distinct community development programme to support community work with women in rural areas throughout Ireland to work with the most disadvantaged communities of women in rural Ireland.

However one cannot but be struck on reading this document by the isolation, oppression and exclusion which characterise the lives of so many migrant women and in particular those in isolated rural areas and in poor working conditions...the particular forms of exploitation (including trafficking) violence, racism and sexism to which many migrant women are subjected. It calls upon all of us - from locally and nationally based women's groups to local development bodies, County Development Boards and State agencies, to take up the challenge to respond immediately and appropriately. (Foreword "Enabling Equality – migrant women in rural Ireland, Migrant Rights Centre Ireland 2008)

Migration and Integration of Migrant Women

The current migration crisis has been described as unprecedented and the worst since the Second World War. Whatever the case, many thousands of refugees are now seeking refuge in European countries.

The recent rise in public opinion regarding the humanitarian role Ireland can and should play in addressing the refugee crisis is to be welcomed and presents many opportunities for community involvement, support and solidarity. Irish people have a history of promoting human rights, social inclusion and equality at home and throughout the globe. There is no doubting the huge levels of public support and demand for a generous and welcoming response to this crisis.

Many women and girls are fleeing conflict in their homeland where they have faced systemic rights violations, including bombardment of civilian areas, killing and disappearance of family members, sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), obstructed access to food, water and electricity, and destruction of their homes and livelihoods. Many have been repeatedly displaced and some have suffered violence, exploitation and abuse while seeking asylum. Women often serve as the main caretakers for children and elderly family members, further increasing their need for protection and support¹⁴.

In providing this response there will be challenges too. These will include the need to:

- put in place supports for particular groups of refugees including women (who may for example have experienced violence or separation from their children) children (who may for example have experienced violence or separation from their parents), older people and victims of the wars in their country of origin.
- ensure the building of strong intercommunity relationships;
- put in place a strategy for integration and Interculturalism at local and national levels;
- create the supports and the spaces for the voices of the refugees themselves and in particular of refugee/migrant women to be heard in the development of responses to meet their needs;
- address potential opposition, antagonism, racism, sexism and harassment;
- address conflict and divisions which may exist between communities of refugees themselves;

Recommendations

CWI Recommends

- That the National Women's Strategy supports an overarching approach to the integration of refugees/migrants with a specific and targeted focus on refugee/migrant women that includes a structure,

strategy and programme. In the past Ireland has used this model successfully in areas such as anti-racism and intercultural work where the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) provided the structure and developed and implemented the national anti-racism strategy. This current crisis requires a similar response but supported by a team of community workers that will directly work with the communities of refugees in particular targeting refugee /migrant women as follows.

a) **Development and Implementation of a National Strategy for the Integration of refugees and the Promotion of Inter-culturalism**

Community Work Ireland proposes the development and implementation of a National Strategy for Integration of Refugees and the Promotion of Inter-Culturalism. Central to the strategy should be a commitment to community development and the community development principles of empowerment, participation, collectivity, social justice, human rights and equality.

b) **Establishment of a National Expert Body for Interculturalism, Gender Mainstreaming and the Integration of Refugees**

We propose the establishment of a National Expert Body for Interculturalism, Gender Mainstreaming and the Integration of Refugees. The National Expert Body would be responsible for;

- Designing the *National Strategy for the Integration of refugees and the Promotion of Inter-culturalism*
- Overseeing the implementation of the *National Strategy for the Integration of refugees and the Promotion of Inter-culturalism*
- Strengthening coordinated action on *mainstreaming of gender-responsive programming and advocacy*
- Increasing national capacity to *effectively respond to the specific needs, priorities of and protection risks facing refugee and migrant women and girls*
- Advising Government on ways to address new and emerging issues and concerns
- Advising Local Integration Groups on development of local strategies and plans with gender mainstreamed throughout.

The National Expert Body should comprise;

- Representatives of Government Departments
- Representatives of state agencies
- Representatives of NGOs with;
 - Community development expertise
 - Expertise in women's empowerment and advocacy
 - An understanding and experience of working to empower diverse ethnic groups
 - Experience and expertise in addressing racism and promoting inter-culturalism

c) **Establishment of a Programme of Community Development Supports for Refugees**

The Community Work Ireland proposes the establishment of a Programme of Community Development Supports for Refugees. The programme should be designed nationally by the National Expert Body for Interculturalism and the Integration of Refugees with input from relevant stakeholders as part of the National Strategy for the Integration of Refugees and the Promotion of Interculturalism for implementation by the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. Implementation should be overseen and monitored by the National Expert Body for Interculturalism and the Integration of Refugees. The programme would include:

- A vision of integration, social inclusion, social cohesion and empowerment of refugees affected by the current crisis.
- A commitment to community development principles and processes involving a recognition of community development as ***“a developmental activity comprised of both a task and a process. The task is the achievement of social change towards the achievement of equality, social justice***

and human rights and the process is the application of principles of participation, empowerment and collective decision making in a structured and co-ordinated way”.²

- Funding for the employment of a team of community development workers throughout the country.

The role of the community development workers would be to;

- Create and facilitate spaces for refugees to come together to support each other, gain confidence and a sense of security
- Work specifically with migrant and refugee women to identify needs and develop appropriate gender specific responses
- Create and facilitate spaces for refugees and members of the local population to come together to get to know each other and build solidarity and support.
- Support and build the capacity of refugees to have a collective voice and a say in the responses being designed to meet their needs.
- Contribute to the development of a Local Integration Strategy (see below) and assume responsibility for overall co-ordination
- Develop and implement specific actions to support women, children and older people
- Network and share experiences, information and ideas with community workers and refugees from other areas
- Contribute to policy and programme development locally and nationally as it pertains to refugees
- Undertake regular needs analysis of the needs of refugees in the area and support refugees to liaise with local services (including health, education and social welfare) regarding responses required
- Work to resolve and learn from conflict situations and create opportunities for progression from conflict as it may arise at local level
- Organise events, mobilising refugees and community members to become actively involved
- Act as an advocate and build the capacity of refugees to advocate on their own behalf
- Highlight and take action on racism, stereotyping and prejudice in all its forms

d) Establishment of Local Integration Groups

Local Integration Groups would be established in each area where communities of refugees are to be located. The role of the Local Integration and Intercultural Groups would be to;

- Devise a local integration strategy for their area in line with the National Integration Strategy for Refugees
- Oversee the strategic implementation of the strategy
- Act as a forum for refugees, community workers and service providers to come together to reflect on progress, issues and appropriate responses
- Act as a forum for the voices of refugees themselves to be heard in the decisions being made that affect their lives

We propose that the Local Integration Groups be established and facilitated by Local Development Companies but would remain independent of the LDCs. They would comprise the following;

- Relevant statutory agencies
- Representatives of refugee communities
- Community workers
- Local Development Companies

² Adapted from Pobal (1999) – Community Development Strategies and Actions within the Integrated Local Development Programme, Insights No. 11. Pobal, Dublin.

¹ As the Community Worker's Co-operative

² The Community Platform is a network of 28 of the main national organisations working to address poverty, social exclusion, and inequality. Our objectives are to facilitate solidarity amongst the organisations involved, organise community sector participation in partnership arrangements with the State, and establish a critical voice for equality, rights and anti-poverty interests at a national level.

³ http://www.esr.ie/ESR_papers/vol37_3/03%20Larraygy.pdf

⁴ <http://eucdn.net/>

⁵ <http://www.iacdglobal.org/>

⁶ <http://enarireland.org/>

⁷ The Refugee and Migrant Coalition is a group of leading NGOs working with migrants and refugees in Ireland and internationally: ActionAid Ireland, Christian Aid, Community Work Ireland, Comhlámh

<http://www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie/event/refugee-and-migrant-coalition-press-conference>

⁸ [http://www.nwci.ie/?/discover/what we do/building the womens movement/convening and chairing womens rights groups/womens human rights alliance](http://www.nwci.ie/?/discover/what_we_do/building_the_womens_movement/convening_and_chairing_womens_rights_groups/womens_human_rights_alliance)

⁹ www.nwci.ie

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ <https://www.ifpa.ie/Hot-Topics/Abortion/International-Human-Rights-Observations-on-Abortion-in-Ireland>

¹² http://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWCI_Pre_Budget_Submission_2017_FINAL.pdf

¹³ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/dozens-of-migrant-women-unable-to-travel-for-abortions-1.2037483>

¹⁴ GENDER ASSESSMENT OF THE REFUGEE AND MIGRATION CRISIS IN SERBIA AND FYR MACEDONIA UN Women January 2016 [http://www2.unwomen.org/-](http://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/country/serbia/gender%20assessment%20of%20the%20refugee%20and%20migration%20crisis%20in%20serbia.pdf?vs=3308)

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