

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN'S ECONOMIC MOBILITY

Insights drawn from  
the Mná na hÉireann,  
Women of Ireland Fund Awardees

**RETHINK  
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Report authored by Amy Power, Fund Manager of  
the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund

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This research comes out of the work of the €1.8m Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund which was funded and supported by Bank of America, and the Department of Rural and Community Development via the Dormant Accounts Fund to empower women who experience disadvantage to secure sustainable employment in Ireland.

# Foreword

COVID-19 has been a seismic global event and its impact has been undeniably gendered. It has both revealed the extent of existing economic inequalities and exacerbated them. Across Europe, we are seeing evidence emerge of a derailing of hard-won gender equality gains.


The pandemic is having a disproportionate effect on women's jobs and incomes. The burden of home care and homeschooling was carried disproportionately by women. We saw an increase in domestic violence during the lockdowns.

As a member of the Steering Committee for the Mná na Éireann, Women of Ireland Fund of Rethink Ireland, I have been privileged to follow the progress of the funded projects, delivered by a group of innovative organisations that are striving to build a more inclusive Ireland, all the while, dealing with the impact of the pandemic on their own organisations and their work with marginalised women.

Through their work, the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund Awardees identified multiple barriers to employment for women during the pandemic, including intersecting and structural discrimination affecting ethnic minority women, migrant women, transgender women, rural women, lone parents, and women living in direct provision. Economic barriers, mental health, access to childcare, our increasing reliance on information technology and the vulnerability of those without access or digital skills: the barriers and needs are complex and multi-layered.

As Director of the National Women's Council, the issues raised by the projects and the women who took part in them very much echo the experience of our members over the past year.

As an organisation concerned with movement building, diversity and solidarity, we know how important it is for women's voices to be heard. And so for us, an important aspect to this report is that it provides a voice for



women who participated in the projects; voices that are all too often ignored or diminished in policy discourse and decision making.

Crucially, the report is solution-focused, providing a pathway to making Ireland a better, more inclusive and sustainable place to live. It points to the need to refocus our labour market activation strategies to address the challenges post COVID-19. It supports the need to provide decent, sustainable, well-paid jobs for women, including sectors in which women are currently underrepresented, such as emerging, higher-paid and green jobs in STEM areas. It makes a strong case for universal basic services, particularly public childcare, and shows the absolute necessity of adopting a gender perspective in our COVID-19 recovery.

The recommendations the report sets out are ambitious but most certainly achievable. They require political commitment and investment to deliver a more equal post-COVID society. As Director of the largest women's membership organisation in Ireland, I offer my commitment that we will be fearless in challenging economic inequality and in playing our part to build a sustainable and equitable future for all women in Ireland.



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Orla O'Connor  
Director  
National Women's Council

# 1. Introduction

Rethink Ireland provides cash grants and business support to charities and social enterprises working in Irish communities across the country. These are the organisations that are not just thinking differently, but who are putting their ideas into practice and building a more inclusive Ireland. The 3-year Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund, in partnership with the Department of Rural and Community Development via the Dormant Accounts Fund and Bank of America, supports six projects to enhance the economic mobility of women.<sup>1</sup> Rethink Ireland has worked closely with these projects during the pandemic. This places us in a unique position to provide insights on the impact of COVID-19 on women experiencing disadvantage and the employment projects that support them. A sustainable and equitable COVID-19 recovery requires a strong emphasis on gender equality. The UN has recommended that governments view their response to COVID-19 through this lens, developing strategies to address the added economic impacts it has had on women.<sup>2</sup>

Through testimonials and case studies from women in direct provision, women parenting alone, transgender women and women in rural Ireland, as well as from the projects that support them, the aim of this report is to illustrate clearly the disproportionate impact COVID-19 has had on women in relation to economic mobility.

With evidence from grassroots organisations supporting recommendations from the National Women's Council, we hope this report will better inform the recovery response and ensure that women in Ireland are included and not left behind.

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<sup>1</sup> Information on the Awardees' projects can be found on the Rethink Ireland website (accessed 16 February 2021)

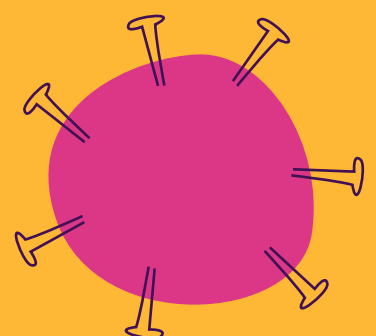
<sup>2</sup> UN, 'Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women' (9 April 2020) (accessed 16 February 2021)

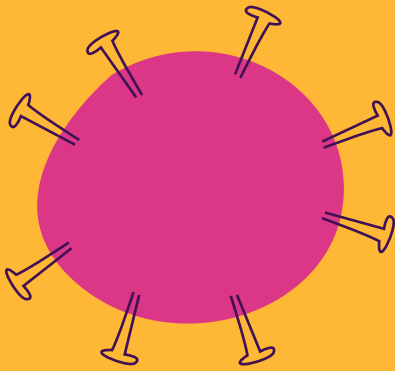
## 2. COVID-19 and the “Shadow Pandemic”

**Women are disproportionately affected by the economic fallout from the pandemic.** A recent UN study warned that COVID-19 could potentially reverse decades of progress on gender equality in the workplace, based on three key factors:<sup>3</sup>

- 1. Sectors employing high numbers of women have been badly affected;** hospitality, retail and leisure, in particular.
- 2. Increased care burdens due to school and day-care closures** is impacting women’s capacity to enter and remain in the workplace.
- 3. The gender divide in digital literacy and access to technology** puts women at a disadvantage where businesses have moved online.

The COVID-19 crisis is amplifying gender inequality. The European Commission has urged Member States to **adopt a gender-sensitive approach** in their responses to the pandemic and, in the recovery phase, to make these measures more effective and ensure no one is left behind.<sup>4</sup> Action has been taken following this, as evidenced in the recent European Parliament report which calls on EU countries to **incorporate targeted actions to improve gender equality in their national recovery and resilience plans.**<sup>5</sup> As part of this action, Members of the European Parliament recognised that the economic crisis caused by the pandemic will lead to even greater inequalities between men and women.<sup>6</sup>





Despite this, there has been too little attention paid to gender equality in economic decision making. While the National Economic Recovery Plan notes a growing need for care workers, that plan and the Recovery and Resilience Plan make no investment in the care economy to achieve this. Rather, investments have tended to focus on boosting jobs within male-dominated industries such as construction and energy, despite the stronger impact of the pandemic on female-dominated sectors.

COVID-19 has **increased economic crises, care deficits and gender-based violence**, with the brunt of the impact being felt unduly by women. A recent UN report states that while more men will die from COVID-19, the social and economic toll from it will be paid, disproportionately, by women.<sup>7</sup>

The socio-economic impact on women is a “Shadow Pandemic” and can be seen in the significant spike in **domestic violence**, as well as **unemployment rates** for women, the increase in **unpaid care work** and **mental health challenges**.

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<sup>3</sup> Jade Cochran et al, ‘Addressing the Economic Fallout of COVID-19: Pathways and Policy Options for a Gender-Responsive Recovery’, UN Women, 2020. (accessed 16 February 2021)

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, ‘Webinar Series on Gender Sensitive Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis’ (10 June 2020) (accessed 16 February 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Frances Fitzgerald, ‘Report on the Gender Perspective in the COVID-19 Crisis and Post-Crisis Period’ (2020/2121(INI)).

<sup>6</sup> European Parliament, Liaison Office in Ireland, ‘Report on COVID & Gender Adopted by the European Parliament’ (21 January 2021) (accessed 15 February 2021.)

<sup>7</sup> Ginette Azcona et al, ‘From Insights to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID-19’ (UN Women, 2020) (accessed 16 February 2021).



## 2.1. Unemployment

**Women are overrepresented in insecure, informal, lower-paying jobs, and in industries majorly impacted by COVID-19.** According to Eurofound, **women account for 61% of workers employed in these industries<sup>8</sup>** and are, consequently, facing higher unemployment rates. According to the Labour Force Survey by the Central Statistics Office (CSO), the **Irish unemployment rate amongst women rose by 53.8% between July and September 2020**, while the unemployment increase rate for men was just 23%.<sup>9</sup> The number of women **working part-time fell to 300,800 in the third quarter of 2020**, down from 333,200 women in the same period of 2019. Women are also more at risk of dropping out of the labour market altogether. According to Eurofound, 4% of women who worked before the outbreak, and then lost their job, did not subsequently actively seek employment, compared with just 1% of men.<sup>10</sup> The severest impact has been on young women, with 5 in 10 men and 7 in 10 women aged 15-24 being unemployed in April 2021.<sup>11</sup>

The Department of Social Protection recognised the **disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women's economic mobility**, stating in May 2020 that the early waves of **those seeking the Pandemic Unemployment Payment were more likely to be women**. This reflected the higher concentration of women employed in hospitality, wholesale and retail, and acknowledges that labour market recovery will take longer to reach these industries than any other. The Department concluded that recent positive moves in the labour force participation gender gap may be reversed, to a degree, **as the heaviest job losses at the onset of the pandemic were young, migrant, female workers.**<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Martina Bisello et al, 'Women and Labour Market Equality: Has COVID-19 Rolled Back Recent Gains?' (Eurofund, 9 December 2020) (accessed 16 February 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Central Statistics Office 'Labour Force Survey: Quarter 3 2020' (accessed 3 February 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Bisello et al (n 8).

<sup>11</sup> Central Statistics Office 'Monthly Unemployment April 2021'. Accessed 21/06/2021

<sup>12</sup> Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, 'The Initial Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Ireland's Labour Market' Working Paper, 2020. (accessed 16 February 2021).



## 2.2. Unpaid care work

The pandemic has resulted in a significant increase in care needs within society. The closure of schools, social services and crèches has overwhelmed health services. Increased care requirements for the elderly have placed an additional burden on households. It is women who have been, and continue to be, disproportionately affected by these multiple responsibilities. The CSO found that more women (21%) than men (15%) are caring for a dependent family member or friend because of the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, women are more likely to report childcare issues related to the COVID-19 crisis. They are finding it more difficult to work from home with the responsibility for homeschooling and the lack of childcare supports. In a recent survey by the National Women's Council, 71% of women during the pandemic were providing care for children, adults, or both, in their own home.<sup>14</sup>

Due to gender role stereotypes, mothers engaged in paid work are often still expected to retain caring and domestic responsibilities. Even before COVID-19, women spent twice the amount of hours on housework per week compared to men.<sup>15</sup> For those women employed during the pandemic, or considering taking up employment, maintaining multiple caring responsibilities while working remotely could have long-term effects on career progression and thereby further widen the gender pay gap.<sup>16</sup> This situation will not be improved by the high number of women taking up flexible working arrangements to help manage their multiple roles.

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<sup>13</sup> Central Statistics Office, 'Employment and Life Effects of COVID-19', April 2020. (accessed 15 February 2021)

<sup>14</sup> National Women's Council, 'Women's Experiences of Caring During COVID-19' (November 2020) (accessed 16 February 2021).

<sup>15</sup> ESRI, 'Caring and Unpaid Work in Ireland' (2019) (accessed 16 February 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Department of Employment Affairs & Social Protection, 'The Initial Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Ireland's Labour Market Working Paper', 2020.

In the pre-COVID-19 period, childcare could be delegated to paid childminders or extended family members e.g., grandparents, but this has rarely been possible during the pandemic. In Ireland to date there has been limited recognition of, or investment in, childcare. Ireland's investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is 0.2% of GDP, compared to the EU average of 0.8% and the UNICEF recommendation of 1% of GDP.<sup>17</sup> A recent study found that Ireland has the fourth highest level of unmet needs for childcare in the EU<sup>18</sup> and is the second worst performing country in the EU with regard to affordability of childcare for lone parents.<sup>19</sup> While affordability is an issue for most parents, the high cost of childcare creates a significant barrier for women parenting alone or women who are not high earners.

## 2.3. Mental health

The social restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed people to unprecedented stress and increased mental health issues.<sup>20</sup> This, coupled with the strain caused by unemployment, an unequal distribution of caring responsibilities, and the increase in domestic violence, indicates that the pandemic may be affecting the mental wellbeing of women more than men. Evidence shows that being female, under 45, working from home, or being underemployed, are all relevant risk factors for worsening mental health.<sup>21</sup> The early mental health effects of the pandemic for women have

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<sup>17</sup> OECD, 'Education at a Glance 2019' (2019).

<sup>18</sup> Ivan Privalko, et al, 'Access to childcare and home care services across Europe: an analysis of the Survey on Income and Living Conditions' (2019) (SILC), 2016. ESRI (n 14) and DEASP (n 11).

<sup>19</sup> Society of St. Vincent de Paul 'Working, Parenting and Struggling? An analysis of the employment and living conditions of one parent families in Ireland' (2019).

<sup>20</sup> B.D. Kelly, 'Impact of COVID-19 in Ireland: Impact to Date' (2020) 113(10) Irish Medical Journal, 214.

<sup>21</sup> Eleonara Fiorenzato et al, Cognitive and Mental Health Changes and their Vulnerability Factors Related to COVID-19 Lockdown in Italy' (27 January 2021) 16(1) PLoS ONE.

been captured by the CSO. In April 2020, more than one in three women (36.7%) reported a low satisfaction with overall life, up from approximately one in ten (9.0%) in 2018. The percentage of males reporting low satisfaction rose from 8.4% to 22.1% in the same period. 27% of women also reported facing higher levels of loneliness, as opposed to 20% of men.<sup>22</sup> In a recent survey of 1,400 women, it was found that, for the majority, COVID-19 meant they had less time to look after their own mental health. Many felt there was no longer any time to practice the self-care activities that supported their mental wellbeing.<sup>23</sup>

## 2.4. Domestic violence

At European level, it has been acknowledged that the response from public authorities has been insufficient in addressing violence against women during the pandemic. Reports of domestic violence in France have increased by 30% since their lockdown began on March 17th 2020, and similar increases have been reported across Europe and North America. The UN cautions that, while it is too early to have comprehensive data, reporting increased by 25% in countries with reporting systems in place. In some countries, reported cases have doubled.<sup>24</sup> In Ireland, Women's Aid observed a 71% increase in visits to its website between March and June 2020, with a 43% increase in calls to its helpline compared with the same period in 2019.<sup>25</sup> Domestic violence reports to the Gardaí increased by almost 25% after the lockdown period began, while the number of domestic violence cases reaching the Director of Public Prosecutions have jumped by 87% in 2020 compared to 2019.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Central Statistics Office, 'Social Impact of COVID-19 on Women and Men', April 2020.

<sup>23</sup> NWC (n 13).

<sup>24</sup> UN Women, 'COVID-19 and Ending Violence against Women and Girls' (2020) (accessed 16 February 2021).

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Conor Lally, 'Domestic violence reports up 30% in some areas since lockdown, says Garda' (Irish Times, 27 April 2020); Colman O'Sullivan, '87% increase in files to DPP over domestic violence' (RTE, 14 November 2020).

# 3. The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Employment Programmes

The Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund Awardees have identified multiple barriers to employment for women during the pandemic. Intersecting and structural discrimination affecting ethnic minority women, migrant women, transgender women, rural women, women parenting alone and women living in direct provision during the pandemic creates additional barriers and challenges that have the potential to negatively affect employment outcomes.

## 3.1. Shifting employment landscape

Many women's employment programmes were developed for a very different employment and economic landscape, one that had a buoyant hospitality and retail market. Many of our Awardee projects have had to shift focus towards job sectors in current demand, such as health and personal care services. Equipping participants to engage in the "new normal", improving their digital literacy to enable them to move from frontline retail roles to telesales or customer service, has also posed challenges for Awardee projects.

## 3.2. Increased caring responsibilities

The closure of schools and crèches has impacted on women's care responsibilities. Without childcare support, many participants have been unable to go to work or even consider it a possibility. More women are available for part-time employment, but the cost and lack of childcare continues to act as a disincentive.

### 3.3. Inequality of access to opportunities

Digital literacy and access to technology is a significant barrier to employment opportunities. Awardees have had to turn away potential participants as they did not have access to laptops. Current participants on accredited courses were unable to fully participate when they moved online. They were subsequently redirected into non-accredited courses dedicated to improving digital literacy and will resume their original course when the gaps have been bridged.

### 3.4. Participant dropout

Awardees have experienced a reduction in referrals and participation during the pandemic. Two projects saw a significant decrease in participation: 66% and 44%. The prospect of further referrals for some Awardees has been negatively affected, with some programme participants either leaving their jobs or not (re)entering the labour market due to care and domestic responsibilities.

### 3.5. Risk of illness

Transgender participants are immunosuppressed and are a vulnerable group during the pandemic, with social distancing and cocooning imperative. In addition, a high number of Awardee project participants who have secured employment in the healthcare and childcare sectors could be at higher risk of exposure to COVID-19.



## 3.6. Relocation of participants

Recruited asylum seeker participants have been relocated by the government across Ireland's direct provision centres during the pandemic, and have been particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 infection in these congregated settings. These centres have limited access to WiFi and IT equipment, as well as limited space to facilitate access and privacy. Participants who have been relocated find it more difficult to stay engaged in the programme as a result.

## 3.7. Underemployment

Training and employment is centred around labour market demand, but has resulted in underemployment for some women. These are mainly asylum-seeking participants who have taken up roles in healthcare, eldercare and childcare, which do not align with their education level and/or work experience in their home countries.

## 3.8. Mental health implications

Many participants are suffering from anxiety and depression, which impacts their cognitive abilities and self-perception. Awardee participants reported feeling anxious when leaving the house and in allowing children to play outside. For women in direct provision, trying to engage in their studies while sharing a small bedroom, coupled with navigating homeschooling with limited connectivity, has resulted in negative mental health outcomes and decreased levels of programme participation.

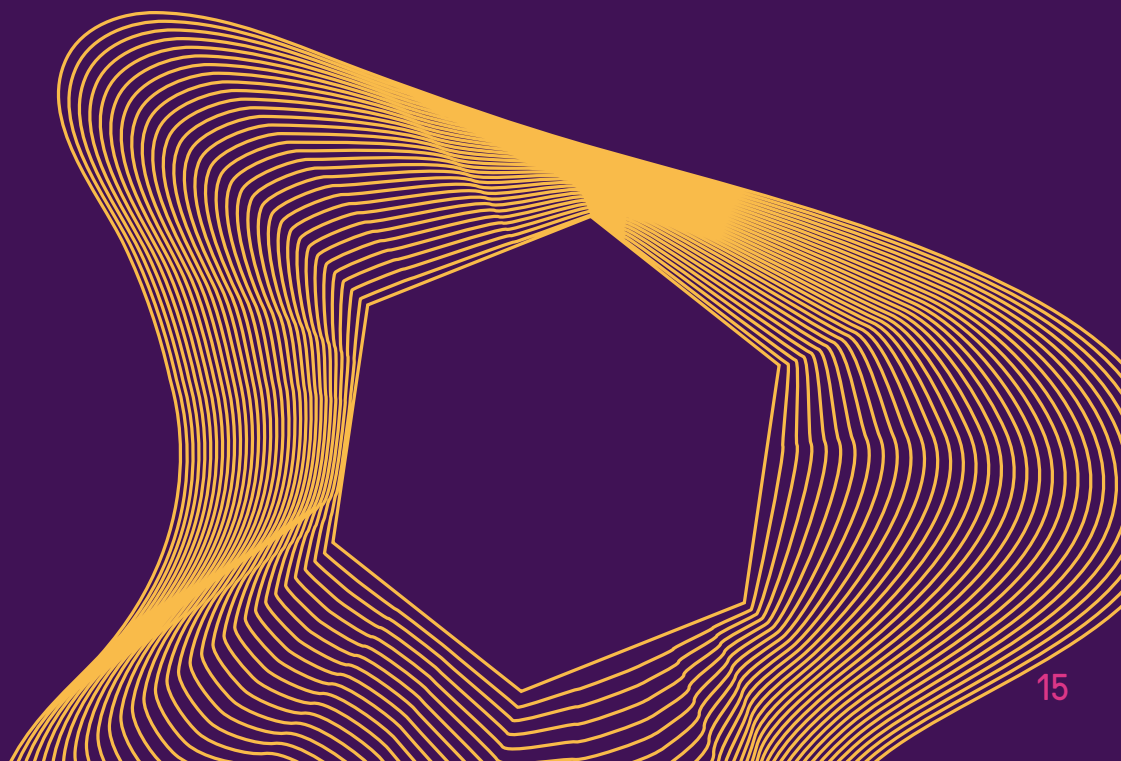


## 3.9. Lack of support

Many fathers have lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19, resulting in reduced child maintenance support and a lack of family support for women engaged in employability programmes. Awardee projects have responded to this by providing holistic wraparound support to participants, to maintain their engagement with supports and continue on the pathway to employment.

## 3.10. Heightened structural barriers to accessing sustainable employment

Participants are facing multiple barriers to labour market entry, further complicated by economic, mental health and childcare factors caused by COVID-19. A different starting point now is needed for women seeking increased employment opportunities; one of building resilience, confidence and basic needs.



# 4. The Impact of COVID-19 on Women and their Employment Journey

Women engaged with Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund Awardees shared their stories of the impact that the pandemic is having on their employment journeys. These quotes and stories place the research literature into context, with women reporting increased caring responsibilities, which is resulting in less time for their own development, reduced confidence and mental health, as well as a lack of opportunities due to limited access to, and experience with, technology.

## 4.1. Reduced focus on personal and professional development

Increased caring responsibilities during the pandemic and lack of adequate childcare provision results in women having to limit their personal and professional development. Women describe the challenge of completing assignments, staying engaged in classes and progressing their education, all while caring for their families:

*"COVID-19 has impacted everyone in the world. Everyone has had their own individual struggles. For me, as a single parent who is in education, I have had to struggle with finding viable childcare in order for me to attend college, which I am lucky enough to have the opportunity to do for my own mental health. A job, which was my goal for 2020 with my kids finally in full-time education, is now out of the question, as hours wouldn't be set and childcare needs to be arranged weeks in advance in any case; even more so now with COVID-19."*

*"While having to work, study, farm, cook, etc., all of a sudden, shopping for others and pharmacy trips became an ordeal."*

*"With children at home all day every day, homeschooling, and a spouse working from home, I feel I am constantly cooking, cleaning, breaking up fights and getting frustrated at a partner who thinks he is busy."*



A woman we will call “Sarah”, who before the COVID-19 restrictions was considering returning to work, shared her experience during the pandemic. Sarah’s story is summarised below and highlights the prolonged and unprecedented stress being absorbed by women with families. The result is women opting to refocus their energy away from themselves and towards their families:

*Sarah has two children in primary school and, as the requirements on her to be the main childcare provider in the home began to ease, she had started to consider returning to her previous career. She had begun to find time at home to focus on personal goals, was rebuilding her confidence and planning to return to searching for a job before the pandemic. However, when the restrictions came into place, she had to refocus her priorities. The family routine was described as going through huge changes.*

*COVID-19 was quoted to be an “unexpected and unrelenting burden”. As well as fulfilling her traditional parenting role, the responsibility of keeping her family safe, educated, and supporting their development and wellbeing has mostly fallen to her. There are none of the traditional educational structures, or any of the voluntary sporting, community or family support structures available to enable her to make time to invest in wellbeing or personal goals.*



## 4.2. Increased mental health challenges

The COVID-19 restrictions have resulted in an unrelenting burden on many women's day-to-day lives, generating a rise in mental health issues such as increased stress and anxiety. As well as fulfilling the traditional caring role, women are now shouldering the responsibility for keeping a family safe, educated, and supporting their development and wellbeing. The following quotes highlight experiences of being overwhelmed, of social isolation and reduced wellbeing:

*"I have been busy minding everyone else, and only think of myself when it's nearly too late."*

*"With very little time to look after mental health and wellbeing, between working outside the home and juggling three teenagers and a husband, I do find that there is little time for me."*

*"I've experienced more stress in trying to motivate teenagers to engage with schoolwork, and emotional stress and loneliness at times, while not seeing family and friends."*



A woman who participated in an Awardee online mentoring programme in May 2020 shared her insights as to why other participants may have dropped out of the programme during the pandemic. Women were described as having reduced confidence, having focused their efforts towards their families, viewing themselves and their employability progress as secondary:

*"To see everything grinding to a halt for your family (in March/April 2020), you refocus your energy away from yourself. There is much more planning involved to just keep the status quo. Even the simple things, like shopping, take such a bigger amount of time. I completely understand why others fell away from the [Awardee programme] or don't have time to invest in themselves at the moment."*

Having been supported to secure a job with the HSE, she would encourage others to participate in the Awardee programme, but notes that most of the women she knows are currently facing a crisis of confidence:

*"If I could speak to a friend whose confidence is completely shot, I would just explain all they do, to help them realise their value, realise that they have got something to contribute, and realise their worth outside of the job they do every day in the home."*





## 4.3. Unequal access to employment and training prospects

Women are experiencing barriers to accessing technology and e-learning, which impact on development opportunities and limit employment prospects. This "digital divide" was highlighted by women engaged in Awardee programmes. The "digital divide" is a term that refers to the gaps in access to information and communication technology.<sup>26</sup> One woman describes the lack of access to quality technology as a barrier to employment:

*"Working from home is not an option for me, as I am a lone parent with 'pay as you go' internet in a rented apartment that has poor connection. Add two hyper, bored children into the mix and it's a natural disaster."*



The digital divide is prevalent in the lives of women living in direct provision. These women have a strong motivation to learn and develop themselves personally and professionally, despite the many challenges they face. Access to employment and education opportunities are hampered not only by a lack of internet access, but also in the disparity of internet speed.

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<sup>27</sup> Accenture, 'Bridging the Gap - Ireland's Digital Divide' (22 July 2020) (accessed 15 February 2021).

The next story highlights the impact of inequality of access to technology, with two thirds of those initially enrolled in training with an Awardee unable to participate because they did not have access to a laptop. For those that did, the learning and social outcomes were strong. This case study then further amplifies the digital divide as hindering economic mobility.

***An Awardee project had nine women in direct provision who were due to commence accredited training in September 2020, which would increase their employability and job opportunities. Six of these women were unable to start as they did not have the required technology.***

***The women who did start the programme stated that it has had a hugely positive impact on their lives. Their self-confidence has greatly increased. They are also becoming proficient in Microsoft Office, having completed the Word Processing and Spreadsheet Methods module. For people who have never met face to face, they have formed a really cohesive group and are providing technical and emotional support to each other, in between the programme sessions.***

Women are also experiencing a lack of familiarity and competence in IT programmes typically used by companies. One woman considering her return to work and education made several observations. In particular, she reflected on how being out of work for a relatively short period of time had impacted so negatively on her confidence and belief in her abilities. While she is looking forward to starting a programme with an Awardee, having already been supported in CV writing, she is still very uncertain about her future or what employment opportunities are open to her. She noted that:



***"I worry about starting to use technology I haven't used before or even just technology I have used. I'm now attaching negative emotion to it, and that becomes even worse to get past, you know?"***

# 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The pandemic amplifies and heightens all existing inequalities of gender, ethnicity and social class. Women who, before the pandemic, were actively engaging in further education, training and employment supports are now putting their families' needs ahead of their own. This is resulting in less women accessing employment-related projects and increased dropout rates. For women in low income households, there are often few supports to rely upon, and social and physical distancing measures have restricted community support mechanisms. Women are experiencing isolation, an increase in domestic violence, and in physical and mental health challenges. For those who are in a position to find employment, some are faced with unequal access to opportunity due to the digital divide. Women have traditionally not benefited from investment in labour market supports to the same extent as men. Around 65% of those benefiting from a CE Scheme or TÚS place are men; less than 1 in 5 beneficiaries of the Rural Social Scheme are women, and only 5% of beneficiaries of investment in apprenticeships were women in 2020. All of these experiences have immediate and long lasting implications for the recovery and post-pandemic Ireland.

Our Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund Awardees are crucial to empowering women experiencing disadvantage to secure quality jobs and education. This is against the backdrop of COVID-19 and being faced with their own organisational challenges, including having to pivot online and manage the heightened barriers to employment. We will continue to support these Awardees to enhance women's economic mobility in Ireland.

As Ireland plans for the recovery, it will be necessary to consider what steps are required to ensure that women are not left behind. To support women in their economic mobility, a gender-proof response is needed to address the "Shadow Pandemic". This is an opportunity to work towards a feminist response to the recovery. The National Women's Council outlines a comprehensive feminist recovery plan<sup>28</sup> which highlights actions that can be taken to increase women's economic mobility, including:

- 1. *The development of a new gender and equality-proof labour market activation plan to support women into decent work, including those women most distant from the labour market***
- 2. *A focus on creating decent, sustainable, well-paid jobs, including jobs paid at a living wage***
- 3. *A new model of welfare and work which ensures work-life balance and the recognition of other meaningful contributions to the common good, such as providing care***
- 4. *Addressing the economic inequalities experienced by working class women, lone parents, women of colour, Traveller women, Roma women, women seeking asylum, disabled women and carers***

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<sup>28</sup> National Women's Council, 'Budget 2021: A Feminist Recovery Plan' (2021) (accessed 16 February 2021).

- 5. *Recognising the economic and social impact of domestic and sexual violence and ending the scourge violence against women***
- 6. *Improving decision making by ensuring the most diverse representation of women at all tables where decisions regarding social and economic policy are made***
- 7. *Delivering Universal Basic Services; investing in the care economy to deliver public childcare and adult social care, and in health and housing to create a society that values care, people and the planet***
- 8. *Embedding gender and equality budgeting in all economic decision making to ensure the allocation of resources tackles inequality. In particular, ensuring the final version of the Recovery and Resilience Plan includes investment in the care economy and supports women furthest from the labour market.***
- 9. *Implementing the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality, including their comprehensive recommendations on public childcare, social care, social protection and a universal pension.***

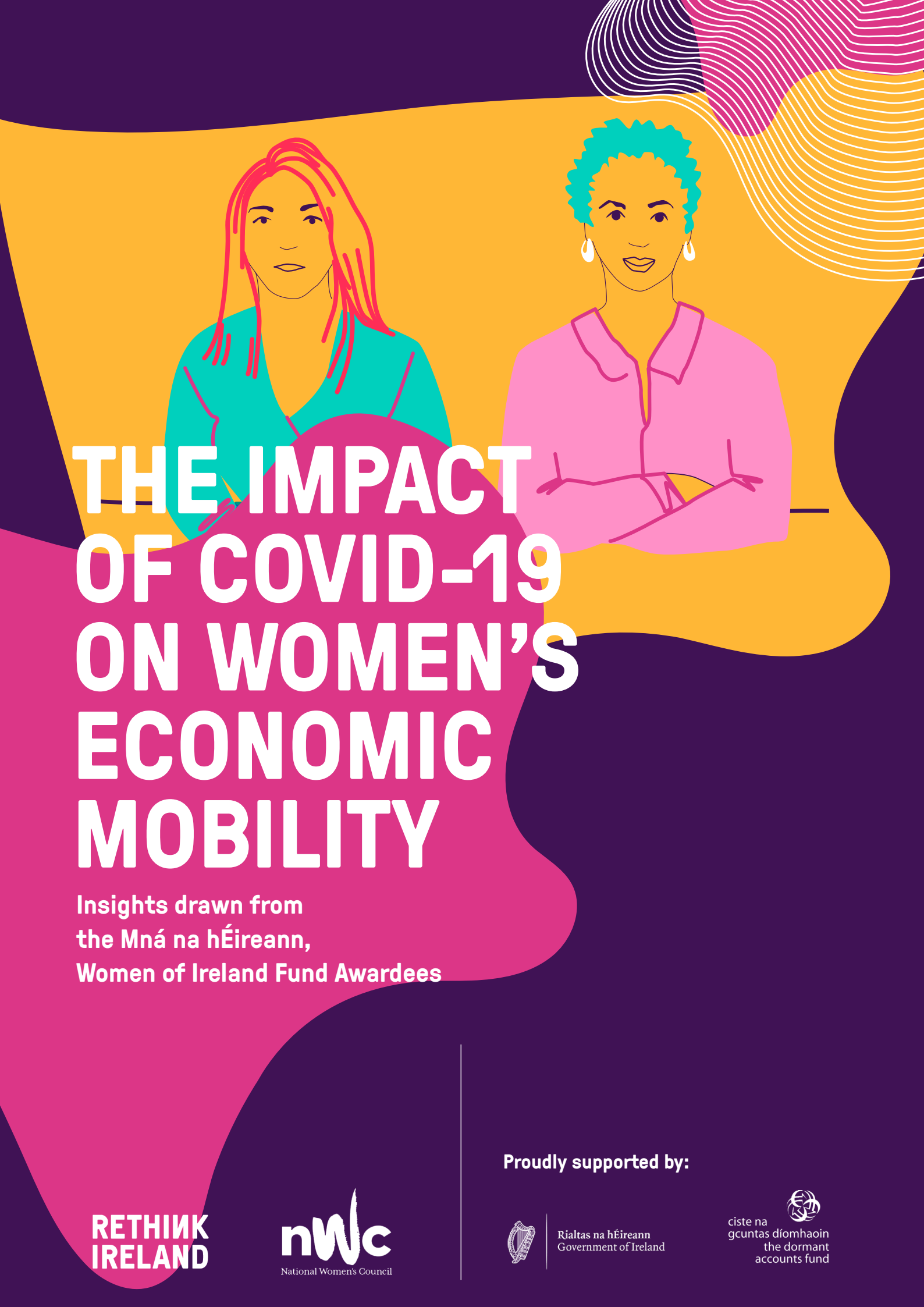
There is a risk that the pandemic will reinforce and solidify the worst impacts of gender inequality, reversing positive developments in women's economic mobility. COVID-19 could, however, only be a disruption to progress. There is still the potential and opportunity to make our country a better, more inclusive and sustainable place to live.

# 6. Appendix

Participation data per Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund Project, 2019-2021

Awardee	2019 (Pre COVID-19)	2020	2021 (Q1)
<i>Dress for Success</i>	583	461	99 (to date)
<i>An Cosán</i>	25	16	24
<i>TENI</i>	-	29	6 (to date)
<i>Irish Refugee Council</i>	-	131	19 (to date)
<i>Westmeath Community Development</i>	100	139	80 (to date)
<i>Equal Ireland</i>	139 (qualifications) 41,700 (training hours)	73 (qualifications) 21,900 (training hours)	65 (qualifications) 19,500 (training hours)





# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN'S ECONOMIC MOBILITY

Insights drawn from  
the Mná na hÉireann,  
Women of Ireland Fund Awardees

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