



Rocking the Cradle or Rocking the Boat?

**Women's Economic Mobility
and the Role of Care in Ireland**

**RETHINK
IRELAND**

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National Women's Council

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Context




The Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund is a **€2.2 Million Fund** created by Rethink Ireland in partnership with Bank of America and the Department of Rural and Community Development via the Dormant Accounts Fund. It is **the first Fund in Ireland to support charities and social enterprises that seek to enhance the economic mobility of women**. Over a four-year period, the Fund has empowered over 1,000 women across Ireland into sustainable employment. The Fund also engages in systems change by sharing the experiences of women in Ireland today and exploring the deep-set issues that affect them.

The publication of *The Impact of Covid-19 on Women's Economic Mobility*¹ by Rethink Ireland, in collaboration with the National Women's Council, is an example of the Fund's systems change approach to women's economic empowerment. The report highlighted the ways in which Covid-19 and the associated lockdowns negatively impacted women's economic mobility. The report detailed that between July and September 2020:

- The Irish unemployment rate for women rose by almost 54%, more than double that for men in the same period
- Women deprioritised their mental health, and felt that they no longer had the time to practise activities that support their mental wellbeing
- Domestic violence reports to the Gardaí increased by 25% since the beginning of lockdown
- Unpaid care work increased during the pandemic, with 71% of women providing care for children, adults, or both, in their home.

To continue this work, the following report was written by Hannah Cousins, Associate Fund Manager on the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund, to highlight a theme that arose throughout the length of the Fund. The women on the Fund continually reported that care and caring responsibilities have a major influence on their lives and that this frequently acts as a barrier to entering employment.



In addition, care has been at the forefront of the political debate in Ireland over the last few years. The Citizens Assembly on Gender Equality which convened during the Covid-19 pandemic, saw 100 citizens meet over 16 months to discuss inequalities in Ireland and how they affect the lives of people of all genders. The Assembly acknowledged that care played a vital role in how we, as a society, made it through the pandemic. During this period, women took on increased care responsibilities in the home to compensate for school closures² and many professional care providers became frontline essential workers managing the impact of Covid-19³. Despite this, care work remains undervalued in both a monetary and a cultural sense⁴.

An Oireachtas Committee was formed to discuss the recommendations of the Citizens Assembly. They recently published their final report which laid out new wording to strengthen the importance of care in the Irish Constitution. They called for the Government to bring a referendum on this issue to the Irish people⁵.

Within this context, this report seeks to examine the issue of care more closely and highlight the disproportionate impact it has on people who identify as women living in Ireland. It is presented here as a root cause of many of the difficulties women face when attempting to join or re-join the labour force or engage in education.

The research presented was gathered by conducting a desk-based review. In addition to this, Rethink Ireland's unique connection to the participants who partake in the programmes funded by the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund, provides an opportunity to platform their voices and adds a new level of depth and understanding to the research. 17 women who participate in the programmes funded by the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund contributed by completing a survey. The women generously shared how caring responsibilities impact on significant areas of their lives. Women who work in the care sector also shared their experiences. Finally, the National Women's Council provided recommendations and concrete actions that can be taken to address the care imbalance and support women's economic mobility.

1. Introduction

Care in Ireland is heavily influenced by gender stereotypes. As women take on the vast majority of caring responsibilities in the home⁶, they often end up leaving the workforce completely to perform these tasks. This can have a detrimental effect on their mental health and wellbeing, leaving women feeling disconnected and undervalued. Working as a professional care worker also has its challenges⁷. The vast majority of workers are poorly paid and do not have access to benefits such as maternity leave or pensions⁸. Many of our survey respondents mentioned how there is no clear job progression in the sector, limiting their ability to upskill and increase their earnings. These long periods out of work or in poor quality employment also leave women in a vulnerable situation later in life as they have not been able to accumulate savings or contribute to a pension.

At a macro level, holding women back from employment and personal development also has a negative effect on the economy. Increasing women's labour participation rates⁹ would have a significant impact on reducing Ireland's national poverty rates and has been linked to economic growth¹⁰.

Additionally, research by the Women's Budget Group in the UK found that investment in care acts as a better economic stimulus than similar investment in construction (without negatively impacting our climate goals)¹¹. Therefore, tackling the unequal distribution of this work and valuing paid and unpaid care work better would lead to a country with a stronger economy and increased wellbeing for women.

2. Care in the Home

Traditional gender dynamics play an enormous role in the distribution of caring responsibilities in the home. While single women in Ireland represent a similar percentage of labour force participation to single men, women who live with their partner report spending more hours performing housework which correlates to lower labour market participation¹². Partnered men, however, report doing fewer hours than single men¹³. Furthermore, male employment rates remain stable whether they are single, married or with children¹⁴. In fact, there is a small increase in employment at the point of fatherhood showing that men's economic mobility often increases when they have children. On the other hand, women's economic empowerment is significantly impacted when they have their first child with the widest gender employment gaps occurring at this time¹⁵.

In Ireland, women with children report doing 42.6 hours of care a week. Men in the same position report doing only 25.2 hours¹⁶; 60% of the time women spend on childcare. Similarly, 60% of women in the UK report the caring responsibilities for children or the elderly hold them back from applying for new jobs or educational opportunities¹⁷. When the care burden increased hugely during the pandemic due to school closures, women were the ones to take on the extra responsibilities even while engaged in full-time employment¹⁸. The gendered division of care makes it difficult for women to enter the workforce, as one respondent reported:



“Any work outside the home meant that I needed a childminder on standby in case the kids were sick/had in-service days etc. As a result, I delayed returning to full time work until the older two were moving into secondary school. This had a huge impact on my own career. I really only got started on my current path at 34.”

Furthermore, childcare costs in Ireland are prohibitively expensive forcing women to stay at home rather than work¹⁹. Recent cost reductions for public childcare are a positive step, however many women still struggle²⁰. This is particularly true for low-income, flexible workers who report feeling like they are working purely to make up for the costs of childcare²¹. Most of the time, women are the ones to reduce their hours because they are making less money and therefore the immediate impact is deemed less significant²². Some of the women in the survey reported pressure from their family and partners to remain available to them to provide childcare in the home:

“I did apply for part-time Christmas work but my partner at the time made it impossible to take it up as he couldn't guarantee he would be home in time and I was made [to] feel guilty about not having quality time together at the weekends.”

Gender dynamics associated with care can also restrict a woman's ability to begin or return to education, which in turn significantly impacts the salary they can earn if they do return to work²³. In 2020, women with lower levels of education made up a much smaller proportion of the European workforce (43.4%) than their male counterparts (65.9%). This gap persists but is less severe when looking at women and men with higher educational attainment (80.5% and 86.9% respectively)²⁴. Therefore, enabling women to obtain higher educational levels can lead to increased chances of securing employment.

However, returning to work or education needs to be balanced against the Government benefits they will lose. Many of the respondents expressed an interest in returning to education or work but feared losing vital benefits if they went back. This a clear barrier for them:

“Since returning to work on a casual basis I have lost some benefits that we were entitled to before.”

“I am starting a CE scheme [Community Employment] in September of which I get an additional twenty euro a week, however I now will have to pay afterschool for my youngest child so it's not an additional €20 a week I will receive once I have paid childcare costs, but for my own mental health and because I want to do the CE scheme I think I need to do it.”

Refugee mothers and families living in Direct Provision testified to how the additional barriers they face affect their ability to join the labour market. These challenges include:

- Being sent to live in rurally isolated environments with limited job opportunities, increasing their dependency on welfare
- Caring for elderly parents who do not speak English and therefore need extra support navigating the health care system
- Working with social welfare or care workers who do not understand their cultural or religious backgrounds
- Raising a family while living in a small hotel room or other direct provision centre
- Raising children who do not have full citizenship and are therefore unable to access opportunities that are available to their peers. This disempowers the young person and embeds them into a cycle of intergenerational poverty.



It is clear that caring responsibilities in the home are not shared equally and that there are few affordable ways for women to access support. In addition, there is an expectation that they will be the ones to make sacrifices in their careers in order to undertake these extra responsibilities. Working in the home can be lonely and isolating for many women especially where that work is not valued. This affects women's economic mobility as they do not feel confident to enter the workforce or return to education. This was the most consistent theme in the responses from participants of the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund programmes:

“Having spent 9 years at home with children you feel invisible. People [should] realise the importance of the homemakers, and it's not just being lazy or for the well off.”

“You can lose your sense of self easily as your life has changed so much and motherhood can be a lonely place at times.”

This time away from the labour market also has a big impact on women later in life. In 2019, the ESRI reported that women's pensions were 35% lower than that of men as the latter's continual employment allows them to build up more resources, ensuring financial stability in old age²⁵. In addition to this, older women often experience a second care-related interruption to their careers²⁶. Women are five times more likely than men to leave work at a late stage in their career, to take on care responsibilities for elderly family members or partners²⁷.

Furthermore, women who remain in employment struggle to progress into more senior roles as these roles are often less flexible, making child and/or elder care responsibilities difficult to manage²⁸. There is an entrenched pattern of women taking on the burden of care at multiple points in their lives. They are not supported to find alternative solutions to care provision and are therefore required to make sacrifices and de-prioritise their economic empowerment. One participant reported this experience:

“I had to turn down a job in recent years as my mother-in-law was diagnosed with cancer and I was the only one available to take her to all appointments.”


The above highlights the impact care has on women in Ireland and how it continues to be undervalued in our society. It also demonstrates that women are holding back from engaging with the labour market or returning to education as they do not have the time or flexibility to do so. It outlines a clear correlation between their greater care responsibilities and their lower economic mobility.




2. Professional Care Work

While women take on extra care responsibilities at home, they are also overrepresented in the professional care work sector²⁹. Again, we see how our society's gender stereotypes are funnelling women into care work. Despite the fact that society recognised this work as 'essential' during the pandemic, work in this sector is often insecure, under-paid and lacking in benefits such as pensions or sick leave pay³⁰. This negatively impacts on women's overall economic empowerment and financial sustainability. The participants of the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund programmes repeatedly cited the lack of job progression, poor pay and inflexibility as issues that affected their financial security and job satisfaction.

A recent survey of early childcare and education workers found that 66% of respondents reported that they were earning less than the living wage, which currently stands at €13.85³¹ per hour³². One in five respondents said they worked a second job and 65% stated they regularly did unpaid work. 90.66% didn't have a pension with employer contributions and 63% didn't get paid maternity leave. The survey also showed that over 40% of workers in the early childhood sector are actively seeking employment elsewhere (ibid). Wages remain low even though the number of staff with third level degrees have more than doubled in the last decade³³. The benefits and working conditions were linked to a feeling of insecurity and make many women feel undervalued:



“People don't realise the job what childcare staff do, and how difficult it can be, both with dealing with children and being badly paid with no benefits. Childcare staff and teachers should be viewed much more highly for the contribution they provide to society”

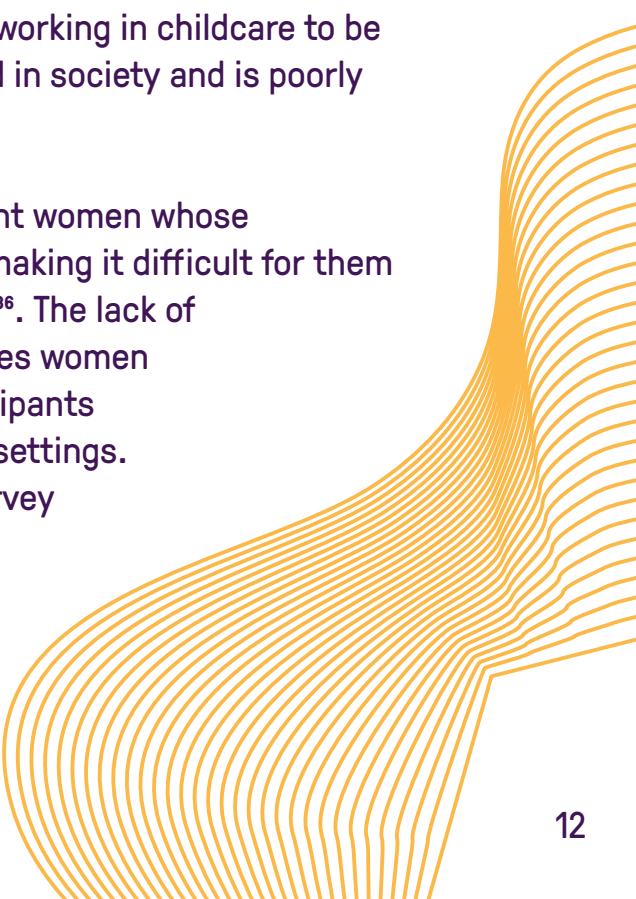



“I find job satisfaction is huge. I really enjoy interacting with the children and staff on a daily basis. The drawback is the drop in income come the summer, which can make life hard at times. And I don’t believe teaching in general is valued enough by society”

In September 2022, early years workers succeeded in getting agreement to set minimum pay rates³⁴. This is a positive step, however further progress is needed to ensure that the important work carried out by care providers is reflected in their pay.

Recently, there has been a call to change from a ‘care narrative’ to an ‘education narrative’. The thinking is to move away from feminised care work in order to become associated with better paid and more respected work such as teaching³⁵. We can therefore infer that, at a societal level, we struggle to acknowledge the innate value of care and care work and are forced to reframe it in order to get decent working conditions for staff. Low pay and poor working conditions perpetuate an association with low status and lack of prestige (ibid). While some women find working in childcare to be fulfilling and rewarding, they feel it is not respected in society and is poorly compensated.

Additionally, this work is often carried out by migrant women whose professional qualifications may not be recognised making it difficult for them to move away from insecure working environments³⁶. The lack of adequate financial compensation and benefits leaves women working in this sector at a disadvantage. The participants reported similar experiences working in other care settings. Many of the migrant women who completed the survey testified that the only jobs that they can get are in nursing homes, but that they do not enjoy the jobs and are not well compensated:





“Working in the care sector in a rural community comes with poor pay, job insecurity and no job progression as a healthcare assistant especially in nursing homes. Considering the health hazards and risks involved, it is demoralising doing so much for so little.”

“I used to work in a nursing home but I am currently unemployed because doing something I am not passionate about does not settle well with me and my psychological and social well-being”

The instability and lack of benefits in this sector leave many women feeling underappreciated despite the fact that they are providing a crucial service to the people of Ireland and their families. They are undervalued both monetarily and culturally. They are often not given the opportunity to progress in their careers or rely on any benefits that provide crucial safety nets. These are all examples of how their economic mobility is not supported in this sector.



4. Case Study

The experience of the women on the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund has been the catalyst and inspiration for this research. Rethink Ireland's relationship with organisations that holistically support women into employment creates a unique opportunity to hear the narratives of how these barriers impact women's lives. Therefore, it is important to put their stories at the centre of this report.

Below is a response, in full, from one participant. Her story traces how the responsibility of many forms of care are placed at the feet of women and how this limits their opportunities, affects their confidence and how women ultimately step up to shoulder that burden with little support from society or the government.

"I have four adult children and when we started our family, it was my choice to stay at home to care for them as we couldn't afford childcare costs. The plan was always that when our children were settled in school, I would go back to work.

However, when my youngest was diagnosed with autism at the age of 4, it was impossible to go back to work as we were dealing with multiple problems and challenges trying to get support for him but the plan was that, when he was older, I would be able to work. During this time my husband was diagnosed with Parkinson's. He had to leave work, and my plans went on the back burner.

We were now a family solely dependent on social welfare, which was devastating for us, but life goes on and we managed.

During those times, I did small, free courses, normally run by the Education Training Board. These kept me going and got me out of the house. But I still wanted to get back into work, even on a part-time basis.

I'm at the stage now where my son is more settled, my husband can still manage himself, and I could work part-time. But those years out of work have had a detrimental effect on my confidence and my ability to find a job. I have had no training, no qualifications, and my CV is about two lines long. I have completed several courses recently which I hope will help but want to take my education further.



The impacts that my caring duties have had on my ability to progress in education and in employment are as follows

- *My life has been consumed with my caring duties for 20 years, and it would have been impossible to work as I am always on call for emergencies/appointments/caring duties.*
- *My confidence in my abilities to work is zero.*
- *Financially, it is impossible to continue with my education, as there is no financial assistance for people on carers allowance to go to college. I would be entitled to SUSI grant if it were a full-time course, but I can't do full-time as I am a carer, and even if I could do a full-time course, I would lose my carers allowance as I can only work/study for 18 ½ hours. It's a catch 22 that will keep us in the poverty trap.*
- *I can't get a job without experience/training/education and I have lost out on so many years where I would have been working if I wasn't in a situation where I was a carer.*
- *My age, lack of experience and training are a barrier. I am 51 with no history of employment since 1999. The 'window of opportunity' for me to have any gainful employment is closing and at this rate, I will be at retirement age and unable to work as my husband will by that stage be fully dependent on me."*

This story demonstrates the impact our society's gendered relationship to care has on individual lives. It is important that women are empowered to make choices that strengthen their economic mobility and their personal wellbeing. However, the participant's response clearly shows how these choices have been taken away. Time and again, the women of Ireland are forced to sacrifice their personal goals in order to provide care to others.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The women of Ireland take on a disproportionate amount of domestic, childcare, and other care work in the home. In addition to this, the paid care that is available is often prohibitively expensive. Coupled with gendered expectations and the gender pay gap, this results in women opting out of careers and education to provide this vital service in the home. Some women seek flexible employment in the care sector but find jobs that are poorly paid and lack crucial benefits. A common thread in both cases is the lack of societal respect for both paid and unpaid care work. The women engaging in this work report feeling overlooked and undervalued. All of the above weakens their economic mobility as they struggle to work or upskill through education.

Providing care is a critical service that underpins our society and enables us to flourish, but it continues to be undervalued and underappreciated. Women take on this work without valid recognition or compensation. A more equal society in which all people shared and valued this work would allow women to choose their own path in life. The participant responses clearly show that this would lead to increased well-being of the women of Ireland. It would also increase their economic mobility and strengthen their financial independence.

The National Women's Council calls for significant steps to be taken to support women and prioritise care in our society. The following are a number of actions that can be taken to increase women's economic mobility, including:

Formally recognise the value of care work in our culture and legal norms

- Hold a referendum to give effect to the Citizens' Assembly recommendations on constitutional change, on the basis of the wording proposed by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality.

Formally recognise the value of care work through decent pay and benefits

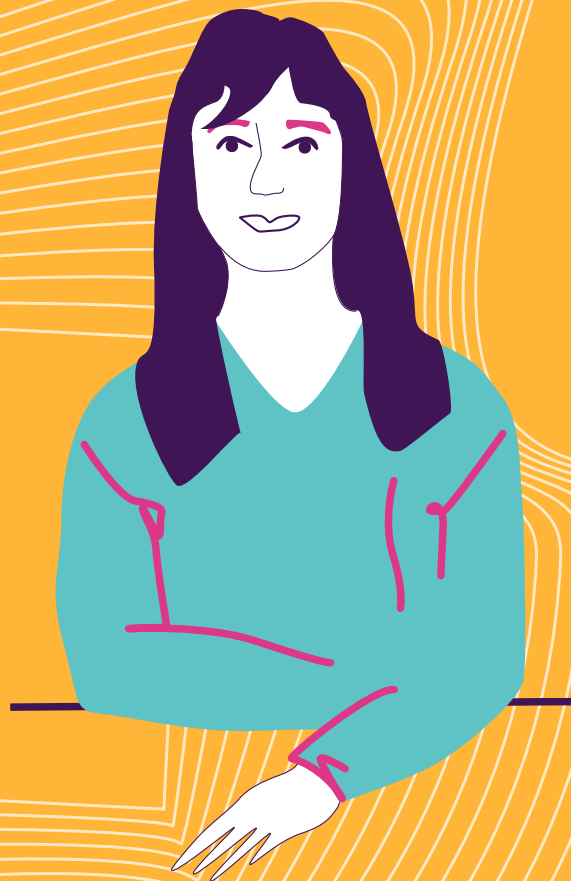
- Ensure time spent on care is not punished when women reach pension age – address the retrospective injustice of the marriage bar by providing a full State Contributory Pension to all women affected and progress to a universal state pension.
- Ensure that the social welfare system supports women who transition in and out of paid work and care and provide targeted supports for lone parents so that their position as sole carers and earners for their families does not continue to push them into greater poverty.
- Invest in better pay and working conditions for all workers in the care sector, starting with implementation of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality and Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality recommendations on pay and workforce progression .
- Invest in a public model of early years and school aged childcare to reduce the cost to parents, improve pay and conditions for workers and deliver a quality, flexible, accessible service for children and families.

Enable all people to participate equally in care work

- Support women and men to combine unpaid care with paid work through adequate paid family leave.
- Make flexible working the norm for all workers, not just those with care responsibilities, so that those who do avail of flexible working for care reasons are not stigmatised as 'less committed' to their careers than other workers. Support the development of quality, part-time work options.

- Reduce working hours for all to allow more time for care. A four-day week could help to facilitate a more equal distribution of care between women and men. Pilot studies in Ireland and elsewhere have offered promising evidence that we can reduce working hours, with no reduction in pay and still maintain or even improve productivity.

This report sheds light on the fact that addressing the care imbalance in the home and greatly improving working conditions in the professional care sector would enhance the economic mobility of women in Ireland. Creating meaningful work opportunities for women and a high-quality public care system that is affordable would empower women, create a more equal society and stimulate economic growth that would benefit Ireland as a whole.



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