



# Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Empowerment Fund

Impact Report

2023-2026

**RETHINK  
IRELAND**

**BANK OF AMERICA** 



An Roinn Forbatha Tuaithe  
agus Pobail agus Gaeltachta  
Department of Rural and Community  
Development and the Gaeltacht

  
ciste na  
gcuntas díomhaoín  
the dormant  
accounts fund



One of Saoirse's founding members, Deborah Oniah

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# Introduction

Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Empowerment Fund was a three-year \$1 million fund created by Rethink Ireland in partnership with Bank of America and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht via the Dormant Accounts Fund. The fund built on the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund, which ran from 2019 – 2022. While the first iteration of the Mná na hÉireann fund focused on generally improving women's economic mobility, this second fund was created to support women facing intersecting forms of disadvantage into employability and education programmes and sustainable employment. The Mná na Éireann Fund demonstrates how government and private sector collaboration can unlock greater opportunities for women by combining strategic funding, shared expertise, and a common commitment to social progress.

Many women face barriers to accessing and sustaining employment during their lifetime, but some face significantly more barriers than others. The learnings from the first Mná na hÉireann fund identified that two groups in particular experience the largest barriers to economic mobility: Migrant women and women experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Migrant women, including refugee and asylum-seeking women, encounter racism, social exclusion and a lack of work experience in Ireland, and are over-represented in low- paid, precarious sectors of the labour market. Women experiencing socio-economic disadvantage often need more holistic wrap-around supports such as childcare and mentoring. The fund focused on achieving deep and transformative impact by supporting women with complex needs who experience multiple forms of disadvantage and discrimination. Its goal was to promote access to employability and training programmes for over 800+ women experiencing socio-economic disadvantage in Ireland and to support over 330+ women into employment.

Following Rethink Ireland's venture philanthropy model, Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Empowerment Fund supported five projects through combined cash grants and business supports, specifically designed to help the social

innovations to grow and strengthen their impact. The cash grants totalled €684,000, a package of bespoke business supports totalling €72,000, and awardees also received a tailored accelerator programme.

## Building on the learnings from Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund (2019-2022)

The Women of Ireland Empowerment Fund was created in response to key lessons from the original Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Fund (2019 to 2022), through which Rethink Ireland, Bank of America and Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht invested €1.76 million in organisations supporting women's economic mobility. The fund achieved significant scale, helping 1,088 women secure sustainable employment and supporting 747 women to progress into accredited education. However, the evidence showed that some women faced far greater barriers than others, migrant women, Traveller

women, minority ethnic women and lone parents needed more targeted and intensive tailored support to reach and sustain work or education. The Empowerment Fund was designed to address this gap. Rather than prioritising scale, it focused deliberately on women experiencing multiple intersecting forms of disadvantage, providing the intensive, wraparound and multi-year support needed to create lasting change. Its smaller participant numbers are a reflection of its purpose, to reach women furthest from the labour market and support deeper, more sustainable outcomes.



Deirdre Mortell, CEO, Rethink Ireland; Former Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht; Joe O'Brien TD; and Ursula Mapley, Chief Operating Officer, Bank of America Europe DAC with awardees at the launch of the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Empowerment Fund 2023-2026





# Fund Overview

The open call and selection process took place from April 2023 to September 2023. The fund received a total of 34 applications. After thorough internal and external reviews, 16 applicants were shortlisted and invited for interview. A number of representatives from donors and external experts contributed to the reviews and interview panels, and Rethink Ireland appreciates the valuable expertise they provided.

After a rigorous selection process, a portfolio of 5 projects and 2 contingencies was then presented to Rethink Ireland’s Grant Making Committee and Board for approval in August 2023.

Contracts between awardees and Rethink Ireland were finalised in October 2023, and the first cash grant payments were released in the same month. As part of the contracting process, awardees met with the fund management team to discuss project goals, complete Organisational Health Assessments and agree on priority business supports. The project management team provided ongoing support across the fund period and the projects exited the fund by June 2026.

The Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Empowerment Fund provided vital multi-year supports to five projects supporting women with complex needs who experience multiple forms of disadvantage and discrimination. Each awardee worked to two common objectives alongside the complex needs of the women they supported.

## Objective of the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Empowerment Fund

The overarching goal of the fund is to promote access to employment for women experiencing socio-economic disadvantage in Ireland. Specifically, they would achieve this by realising two key objectives:

800+

women access an employability and/or education programme, as well as holistic wraparound supports centred on their unique needs



330+

women are supported into quality sustainable employment

# Our Venture Philanthropy Model

At Rethink Ireland, we back the country’s best social innovations to scale and maximise their impact. We do this through a venture philanthropy model, a funding method that uses the tools of venture capital investments. The model supports social innovations by investing cash grants and providing tailored business supports to develop long-term social impact. We measure the success of a project by the level of positive change it makes, exercising

the same discipline and rigour expected of venture capital funds.

Through the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Empowerment Fund, five organisations received a total of €684,000 in cash grants and business supports. These grants supported programme delivery, staffing and organisational development, providing vital resources to help awardees grow and deepen their impact.

## Cherish CLG t/a One Family

|                          |          |
|--------------------------|----------|
| Cash Grant Amount        | €135,000 |
| Business Supports Budget | €14,400  |
| Total Investment         | €149,400 |

## Equal Ireland

|                          |          |
|--------------------------|----------|
| Cash Grant Amount        | €133,000 |
| Business Supports Budget | €14,400  |
| Total Investment         | €147,400 |

## Saoirse Ethnic Hands on Deck CLG

|                          |          |
|--------------------------|----------|
| Cash Grant Amount        | €132,000 |
| Business Supports Budget | €14,400  |
| Total Investment         | €146,400 |

## Meath Travellers Workshops

|                          |          |
|--------------------------|----------|
| Cash Grant Amount        | €122,000 |
| Business Supports Budget | €14,400  |
| Total Investment         | €136,400 |

## Jobcare CLG

|                          |          |
|--------------------------|----------|
| Cash Grant Amount        | €90,000  |
| Business Supports Budget | €14,400  |
| Total Investment         | €104,400 |

Total Invested  
€684,000





Alongside funding, awardees received a package of business supports designed around their specific needs and stage of development. These supports were informed by annual Organisational Health Assessments (OHA). The OHA is an internal Rethink Ireland tool used to assess and track our awardees' organisational capacity. The tool helps to identify the supports needed to strengthen their organisation and scale. It is not meant as a tool for grading awardees, and it is not tied to their cash grants. The OHA is completed collaboratively and assesses organisational development across eight areas: impact management, communication, strategy, financial resilience, innovation, scaling, equality, diversity and inclusion, and climate action and environmental sustainability.

A core element of the model is tailored consultancy support, enabling organisations to work with expert consultants on strategic challenges and opportunities. This support helps organisations

build stronger foundations for the future, strengthening areas such as strategy, financial resilience, scaling, impact measurement and communications.

Awardees also took part in Rethink Ireland's Accelerator Programme, which supports awardees to build the knowledge and skills needed to expand and deepen their impact. It provides training from best-in-class experts across the private, nonprofit and public sectors. A defining feature of the fund's programme was that several of the group workshops were paired with follow-on one-to-one mentoring, so that the shared learning of the workshop could be applied to each organisation's specific circumstances. This proved to be a very effective model. Together, these financial and non-financial supports helped the awardees become more resilient, effective and better positioned for long-term impact.

## Leveraging the support of Bank of America

Alongside its funding, Bank of America contributed directly to the fund through two programmes. Through the **Champions Programme**, awardees were paired with senior Bank of America staff who

provided mentoring, networking opportunities and skills-based support tailored to each organisation's needs. This included support in areas such as leadership, organisational development, communications, financial literacy, cybersecurity awareness, and participant employability skills. Bank of America also created and hosted the **Future Prospects Programme**, an eight-week paid internship opportunity for women participating across the Mná funds. Together, these programmes complemented the fund's financial and capacity-building supports by providing awardees and participants with access to professional expertise, workplace experience and valuable networks.



### Cash Grants

Flexible multi-annual funding towards staff, delivery and running costs, awarded to each project across three years of the fund.



### Tailored Supports

One-to-one consultancy matched to each organisation's needs, spanning strategy, impact measurement, financial sustainability and communication.



### Accelerator

Group of workshops paired with one-to-one mentoring, building capacity in areas such as impact storytelling, financial resilience, and scaling.



### Bank of America Partnership

Mentoring skills and professional opportunities through the Champions and Future Prospects programmes.



# Impact Overview

Over three years, the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Empowerment Fund reached women who are among the furthest from the labour market and enabled them to take further steps into education, training and sustainable employment.

The fund was launched with the goal of promoting access to employment and education programmes for 800 or more women, and of empowering 330 or more women into employment.

Performance against those targets across the fund period is set out below.



885

Women supported to access education or training

Target was 800+



352

Women supported into employment

Target was 330+

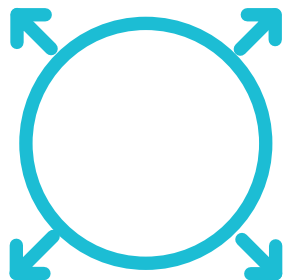


Confidence and wellbeing

Awardees reported increases in participant confidence and wellbeing, using varied approaches (see awardee profiles)

39% increase

Awardee Capacity



The five projects supported 885 women to access an employability or education programme and 352 women into employment. Both results surpass the goals the fund set out to achieve, and both surpass the combined commitments the five awardees made at the point of investment. Behind

each of these numbers is a woman who took part in employability training for the first time, moved into further education or training, got her first job in Ireland, or returned to work after time spent parenting or caring. The sections that follow set out how each project made that happen.

## Communities & Marginalised Groups Supported

Target Group

Supported by:

Women experiencing socio-economic disadvantage

5

All Organisations

Migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women

2

Saoirse, Jobcare

Traveller women

1

Meath Travellers Workshops

Lone parents

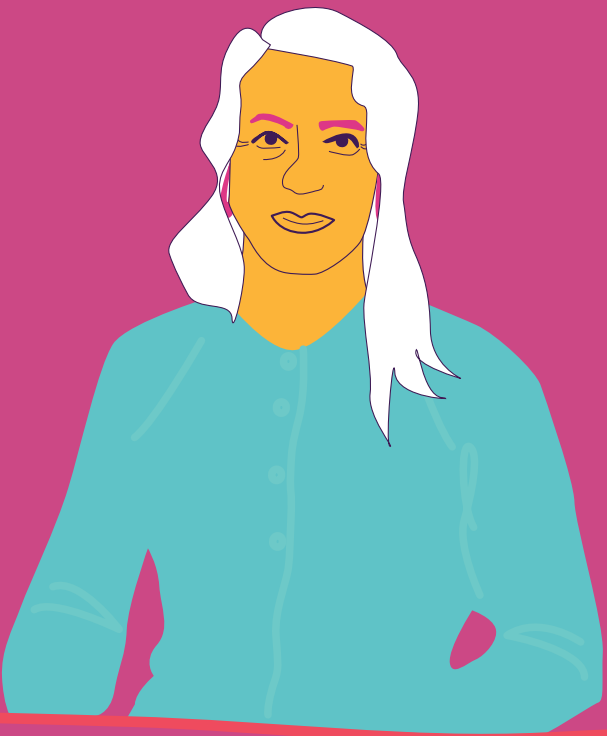
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One Family

Rural women

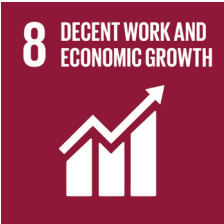
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EQUAL Ireland





All five projects worked towards the following Sustainability goals



**SDG 8:**  
**Decent Work and**  
**Economic Growth**

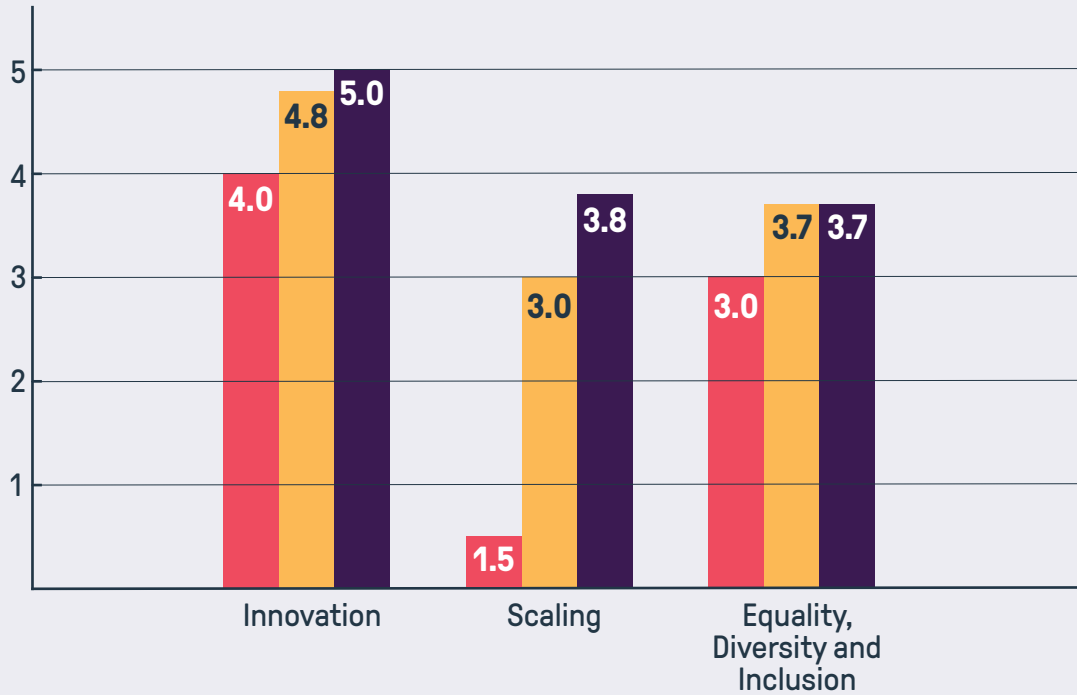
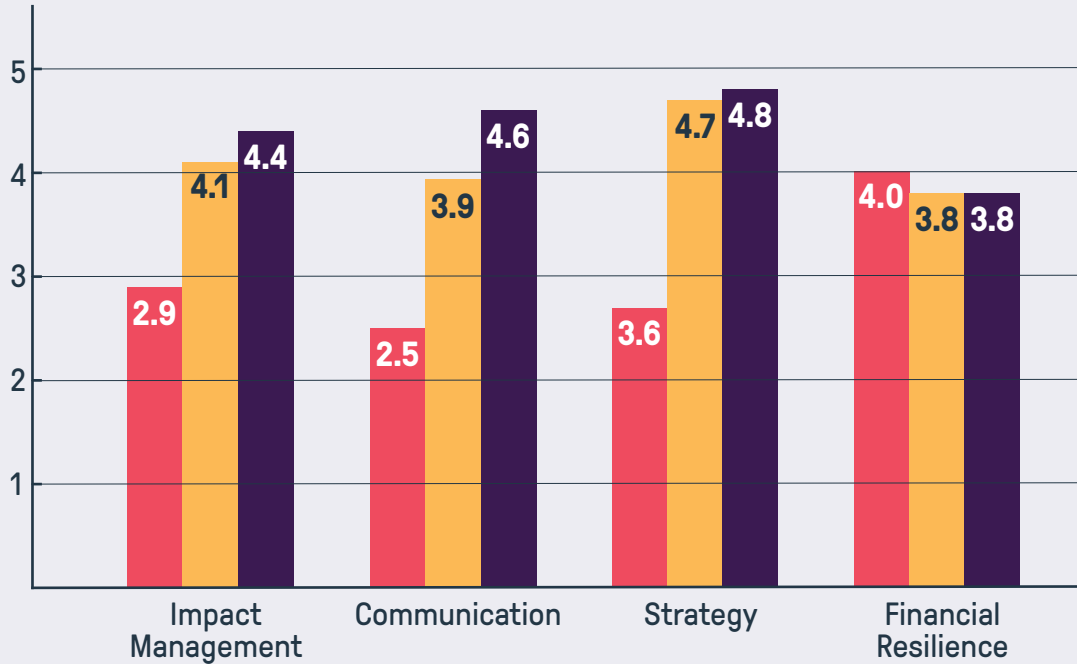


**SDG 10:**  
**Reduced**  
**Inequalities**



**39% Growth in Organisational Health Scores**

Over the course of the fund, awardees improved their average Organisational Health Assessment score from 3.1 to 4.3, demonstrating substantial organisational strengthening.



- Average baseline
- Mid term
- Average end (exit)

# Statement from Antony Jancic, CEO of Bank of America Europe DAC and Country Executive for Ireland

Access to education, skills development and meaningful employment is fundamental to creating a more inclusive and prosperous society. Since 2019, that belief has underpinned Bank of America's partnership with Rethink Ireland, supporting pioneering organisations that are tackling pressing social and economic challenges across Ireland.

**Building on a shared commitment to expanding opportunity and driving positive change, we are proud to have supported two successive funds, focused on empowering women and broadening access to opportunity.**

For those facing barriers to opportunity and access to structured skills support, these funds have delivered lasting impact and been truly transformative. Helping to build greater confidence, economic participation and long-term prosperity, empowering people to unlock their potential and achieve their employment ambitions, creating positive change for individuals, families and communities across Ireland. In parallel, through the partnership, organisations are equipped with the skills, training and tools needed to ensure sustained success.

The achievements highlighted in this report demonstrate the power of targeted investment, community-led innovation and long-term collaboration. We are proud to work alongside Rethink Ireland and the organisations delivering this important work, helping to build a future where more people have the opportunity to participate, succeed and lead.

## **Antony Jancic**

CEO of Bank of America Europe DAC  
and Country Executive for Ireland





# Meet the Awardees



## Enterprising Women EQUAL Ireland

|                     |                                                              |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| Project HQ:         | Galway                                                       |
| Impact Location(s): | Nationwide                                                   |
| Target Group:       | Rural women, socio-economically disadvantaged women          |
| Total Award:        | €147,400 (€133,000 cash grant, and €14,400 business support) |

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Enterprising Women supports women in rural communities who face barriers to education, employment and entrepreneurship. Delivered by EQUAL Ireland in partnership with Reskill Ireland, an organisation founded by women who previously participated in EQUAL Ireland's Amplifying Rural Women's Voices programme through the first Mná na hÉireann Fund, the programme is a powerful example of long-term impact and women supporting women.

Designed around the realities of participants' lives, including caring responsibilities, financial pressures, isolation and low confidence, it combines mentoring, confidence-building, employability training, flexible pathways to self-employment and freelancing, helping women to progress into work, education and enterprise.

### IMPACT OVERVIEW

Over the three years of the Fund, Enterprising Women:

- **Supported 268 women with training, skills and confidence building and supported 71 women into employment and self-employment.**
- **Delivered training** in areas including CV and interview skills, self-employment and freelancing, leadership, Learning to Learn and cybersecurity and fraud awareness. Content was adapted each year in response to participant feedback.
- **Opened routes into a wide range of work**, with women moving into roles across accountancy, social care, retail, catering, graphic design, horticulture, education, creative writing, clothing design, freelance interpreting and wellness services.



- **Supported women to progress into accredited education** across a broad spread of disciplines, from communications and IT to further certificate-level study.
- **Grew women's confidence**, with participants consistently reporting they felt more able to take the next step, whether attending an interview, enrolling in education or starting a business, steps many had not felt able to take before joining the programme

*“Rethink Ireland’s investment has strengthened EQUAL Ireland’s ability to turn lived experience into lasting impact in terms of leadership, learning and sustainable jobs”*

Nuala Keher  
Project Lead, EQUAL Ireland



## ROLE OF THE NON-FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

The fund strengthened how EQUAL Ireland’s communicates about the programme and its impact. They worked with a consultant to develop a

communication strategy and build communication assets, for use on social media.

# New Futures Employability Supports for Women Parenting Alone

## Cherish CLG t/a One Family

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

New Futures is an employability programme designed specifically for lone parents who want to move from social protection payments into education or employment. Based in Dublin and delivered in both online and in-person formats, it supports lone parents across the country through four strands: personal development, covering self-confidence, communication, stress management and goal setting; employment support, covering job-seeking skills, CVs, interview preparation and access to opportunities; individualised support, through regular one-to-one sessions and a personal action plan; and wraparound family support, including parent mentoring, laptop loans, and childcare and travel subsidies for the in-person course. The investment from the fund enabled One Family to continue delivering the programme, strengthen its capacity, and expand its reach and impact.

Many lone parents have had difficult life experiences that can erode the self-belief and skills needed to put themselves forward for further education or employment. For them, the wraparound support that sits alongside the training is often the key to progressing at all.

### IMPACT OVERVIEW

Over the three years of the fund, New Futures:

- **Supported 89 women** through its New Steps and New Futures **employability programmes**.
- **Supported 34 women** to progress into **further and accredited education**, an outcome One Family values as highly as employment.
- **Supported 32 women into employment**.

|                     |                                                              |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| Project HQ:         | Dublin                                                       |
| Impact Location(s): | Nationwide                                                   |
| Target Group:       | Lone parents                                                 |
| Total Award:        | €149,400 (€135,000 cash grant, and €14,400 business support) |



- **Opened routes** into a wide range of roles, with women moving **into work** across retail, education, healthcare and caring, childcare, pharmacy, special needs assistance, finance, administration, ICT, hospitality and public sector roles.
- **Delivered wraparound supports** that kept participation within reach, including one-to-one keywork sessions, parent mentoring, laptop loans, and childcare and travel subsidies.
- **Women recorded improvement** in confidence and skills, with overall improvement typically reported at **85 per cent** or above.

## ROLE OF THE NON-FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

The fund strengthened how One Family build a stronger evidence base for the impact of New Futures. Over the three years the organisation embedded a consistent approach to measuring

participant outcomes, tracking each woman's progress in confidence and skills from the start of her programme to the end.

*“Through the fund, the New Futures programme has been able to reach participants across the country via online delivery. This has increased our impact as an organisation, supporting participants to gain relevant skills and progress into employment and training.”*

Niamh Wynne  
Project Lead, One Family



## CASE STUDY

My name is Louise. Before starting the One Family New Futures course in 2025 I was not in a good place. I had gone through a difficult separation and was struggling with low self-esteem, a lack of confidence, and a loss of belief in myself. Life felt very challenging, and I knew I needed to make a change.

When I saw an advertisement for the One Family New Futures course, I decided to apply. I hoped it would help me move forward and create new opportunities for myself. Looking back now, it was one of the best decisions I have ever made. I absolutely loved the course and learned so much. The programme covered personal development, communication skills, and practical preparation for returning to employment or progressing to further education. As part of the course, I developed my CV and took part in a mock interview with Bank of America, which was an invaluable experience. The support and encouragement I received from the One Family team was outstanding. I was matched with a mentor, Muire, and knowing she was always there if I needed guidance or support made a huge difference. At a time when my confidence in my own abilities was so low, having someone who believed in me and encouraged me to keep going was incredibly important. I honestly don't think I would have achieved as much as I did without their support.

Another wonderful aspect of the programme was connecting with the other women on the course. They came from all over Ireland, and it was comforting to meet people who understood the challenges I was facing. Before joining the course, I had become quite isolated at home, so the opportunity to build new friendships and connect with others in similar circumstances meant a lot to me.

By the end of the course, I realised how much I enjoyed learning and meeting new people. I knew I didn't want to lose the progress I had made, so I applied to my local Further Education College. I have recently successfully completed the Office Administration Legal and Medical Secretary course, graduating with nine distinctions and one merit. Before taking part in the New Futures programme, I would never have imagined myself applying to college, let alone achieving those results. The course gave me the confidence and self-belief to keep moving forward.

The One Family New Futures course has truly been life-changing for me. It helped me rebuild my confidence, rediscover my potential, and take positive steps towards a brighter future.



Staff from One Family



# Saoirse

## Saoirse Ethnic Hands on Deck

Project HQ: **Cork**  
Impact Location(s): **Nationwide**  
Target Group: **Women seeking asylum**  
Total Award: **€146,400 (€132,000 cash grant, and €14,400 business supports)**

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Saoirse is a holistic initiative that supports migrant and refugee women across Cork City and County on a pathway towards empowerment and economic independence. Founded and led by women with lived experience of migration, it is built on a “by us, for us” approach that recognises the women it works with not as recipients of support but as leaders, creators and changemakers. The project works through three pillars: practical employment-ready skills tailored to the barriers migrant women face entering the Irish workforce; specialised training in textile production, and personal development, using confidence coaching and tailored support to help women approach employment with resilience and self-assurance. The investment from the fund aimed to create real pathways into work and self-employment while keeping migrant women at the centre as leaders of their own futures.

Many of the women Saoirse works with are living in or transitioning from Direct Provision and face significant, compounded barriers to employment in Ireland, alongside enormous skills and talent that too often go unrecognised. The project exists to change that.

### IMPACT OVERVIEW

Over the three years of the fund, the project:

- **Supported 149 women** with employability and specialised production **training** including sewing, crocheting, and candle making.
- **Supported 94 women into employment**, including women establishing themselves as sole traders producing craft products.
- **Delivered training** that evolved each year in response to participants, spanning entrepreneurship, CV and employability skills, barista and customer service training, leadership, Safe Pass, clean pass and retail security.

- **Opened routes into employment** concentrated in the care and hospitality sectors, alongside self-employment in craft production, with women supported to register as sole traders and understand their rights.
- Paired **training with practical wraparound support**, including guidance on sole trader registration and access to information supports.
- **Grew women’s confidence**, with high proportions reporting increased confidence each year, **84 per cent** of those asked in the first year, **96 per cent** in the second and **86 per cent** in the third, gathered through direct follow-up suited to the women’s circumstances.

Saoirse’s most significant shift over the fund was in how it delivered its specialised production training. What began with larger, externally facilitated sessions became a more personalised, small-group model shaped by what worked for participants,

and increasingly a peer-to-peer approach in which women who had gained skills went on to teach others. It was not the model the project set out with, but it proved far more effective, and it carried an unexpected benefit: the women who stepped into teaching roles grew in leadership and confidence, deepening the “by us, for us” ethos at the heart of the organisation. Alongside this, the project reshaped its definition of employability to reflect the women’s own goals, recognising that for many participants who are parents and carers, part-time or flexible work is the realistic and desired outcome rather than full-time employment.





## ROLE OF THE NON-FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

The organisation itself strengthened across every area over the three years. Its governance, financial systems and planning are all more robust, and impact measurement is now embedded in how the organisation works, with standardised data collection, quarterly internal reporting and

a refreshed strategic plan setting clear goals to measure delivery against. The organisational health assessment, undertaken for the first time on this fund, gave Saoirse a practical way to track that progress year on year and provided something tangible to share with its board and other funders. As a small organisation, this was also its first experience of managing a multi-year grant, an asset it can now demonstrate to future funders. Tailored consultancy support and workshops over the three years brought specialist expertise that a small organisation could not otherwise have resourced.

*“One of the most valuable aspects of the Mná Empowerment Fund has been the non-financial support. Over the past three years, this has helped us grow our organisation in more ways than we could have imagined, ultimately allowing us to increase our impact. As a small organisation with very limited capacity and a heavy reliance on volunteers (like many others in Cork), the structured support from Rethink Ireland has helped us build a stronger foundation in areas like governance and finance. Working with consultants to focus on internal systems has made us more stable, more strategic, and better equipped to carry out our mission of supporting and empowering migrant women.”*

Vera Stojanovic  
CEO, Saoirse Ethnic Hands on Deck



## Traveller Women Empowerment Meath Travellers Workshops

|                     |                                                              |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| Project HQ:         | Meath                                                        |
| Impact Location(s): | Meath                                                        |
| Target Group:       | Traveller Women                                              |
| Total Award:        | €136,400 (€122,000 Cash grant, and €14,400 Business Support) |

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Traveller Women Empowerment is a three-year programme delivered by Meath Travellers Workshops that supports Traveller women into education, training, employment, health and wellbeing services, and personal development. It combines practical and accredited skills training, confidence-building activities, health and wellbeing supports, and one-to-one employment guidance, all delivered through a culturally responsive, community-led approach that values Traveller identity and lived experience. The investment from the fund enabled the organisation to build and deliver a comprehensive package of supports tailored to the needs of Traveller women across the county, and to reach many women who had not previously taken part in education, training or employment-focused programmes.

Traveller women continue to experience significant inequalities in education, employment, health and social participation. Many face discrimination, low educational attainment, long-term unemployment, caring responsibilities and traditional gender expectations, alongside a lack of culturally appropriate supports. The project exists to help women overcome those barriers, build confidence and skills, improve their wellbeing and move towards greater economic independence, while maintaining and celebrating their Traveller identity.

### IMPACT OVERVIEW

Over the three years of the Fund, Traveller Women Empowerment:

- **Supported 96 women** to access skills training.
- **Supported 11 women** into education.
- **Supported 27 women into employment.** Delivered a wide range of practical and culturally appropriate skills-based training geared towards employment and self-employment, including catering, dressmaking and alterations, hairdressing, barista training, cake decorating, makeup and aesthetics, first aid, and interview preparation.



- **Opened routes into employment** across care work, healthcare, special needs assistance, Traveller family support with Tusla, catering and other roles, with several women establishing their own businesses in areas such as catering, beauty and floristry.
- **Supported women** to progress into accredited **education**, including courses in special needs assistance and childcare fields that Traveller women particularly value as routes to greater Traveller representation in health and education settings, as well as social studies and literacy classes.
- **Grew women's confidence and wellbeing**, with health and wellbeing woven through every year and, by the final year, 56 per cent of women reporting improved confidence since joining and 83 per cent rating their confidence highly in relation to applying for education, training or employment.

### ROLE OF THE NON-FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

The fund also strengthened Meath Travellers Workshops as an organisation. Participation deepened engagement from Traveller women across the county, built new partnerships with training providers, health services and employment support agencies, and expanded the referral pathways available to participants. The business supports, networking and peer learning provided through Rethink Ireland strengthened the organisation's

capacity for programme delivery, monitoring, evaluation and long-term planning, while the annual organisational health assessment gave it a way to track its development year on year.

*“Being part of the Mná na hÉireann (Women of Ireland) Employment and Training Programme has had a transformative impact on Meath Travellers Workshops and on our work alongside Traveller women. Over the three-year period, the programme has strengthened our capacity to support Traveller women's leadership, skills development, and meaningful participation in education and employment pathways. The funding enabled us to deepen our engagement, respond more effectively to the lived realities of Traveller women, and deliver tailored, culturally appropriate supports. As a project, we have seen increased confidence, progression, and visibility among Traveller women, while our organisation has grown in strength, sustainability, and impact as a result of this investment.”*

Marina Cunningham,  
Project Manager





# Progression Strategy for Disadvantaged Women

## Jobcare

Project HQ: **Dublin**  
Impact Location(s): **Nationwide**  
Target Group: **Women experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and long-term unemployment**  
  
Total Award: **€104,400 (€90,000 Cash grant, and €14,400 Business Support)**

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Progression Strategy for Disadvantaged Women supports women who are distant from the labour market to build the skills, confidence and connections they need to move into employment, education or training. It is delivered through Jobnet, Jobcare’s long-established employability programme, which combines a structured course with one-to-one support and the involvement of volunteer mentors drawn from the world of work. The investment from the fund enabled Jobcare to focus this proven programme specifically on women experiencing disadvantage and long-term unemployment, and to strengthen the support around them as they progressed. Many of the women the programme works with have been out of paid work for a long time, and face a combination of low confidence, gaps in recent experience, and practical barriers to taking part. Jobnet is built to meet them where they are, pairing practical employability skills with the encouragement and belief that make a first step possible.

### IMPACT OVERVIEW

Over the three years of the Fund, the Progression Strategy for Disadvantaged Women:

- **Supported 283 women** through its Jobnet employability programmes.
- **Supported 128 women** into employment.
- **Delivered training** built around real job readiness, including CV reviews, LinkedIn, mock interviews, elevator pitch and interview technique, and a Connect networking day linking participants with employers, one recent event bringing together 60 organisations.
- **Connected women with the world** of work through volunteer mentors and employer engagement, including site visits to major employers such as LinkedIn and Microsoft.

- **Grew women’s confidence significantly.** One recent cohort recording an average 33 per cent increase, and in an earlier cohort, every woman who responded reported increased confidence and a clearer sense of her next steps

The fund also strengthened how Jobcare captures and understands its impact. Through its business supports, the organisation developed an Impact Measurement Framework and integrated its participant and follow-up data into a single system, giving it a more rigorous view of how women progress during the programme and after it. In the final year, Jobcare worked with Rethink Ireland to create a set of participant and volunteer videos, both to tell the programme’s story and as a learning opportunity for the team in communicating its impact.

The strength of the programme’s volunteer base was a feature throughout. Volunteers act not only as mentors but as role models, among them senior professional women who show participants what is possible, reinforcing the confidence the course is designed to build.



*“The Rethink Ireland Mná na hÉireann Fund has supported Jobcare to help hundreds of women build confidence and clarity to take steps forward in their job search, and ultimately to secure work that is meaningful to them. It is such a joy to hear women share their successes. They all share that sense of relief they feel when the weight of job searching and unemployment is lifted. On a practical note, the support of Rethink Ireland’s non-financial support has also enabled us to improve our processes, so we can continue to tell these success stories well and better measure the impact of the work of Jobcare.”*

Emily Murtagh,  
Project Lead, Jobcare



## CASE STUDY

### Carol, Jobnet Jan - March 2026

Navigating a return to work in Ireland after a long period overseas was far more challenging than I had ever envisaged. I returned to find an incredibly competitive job seekers market awash with extremely talented individuals all looking for the perfect role and a recruitment landscape where AI agents and ATS filtering of applications meant that you had to be ahead of the game just to get the attention of a hiring manager.

The team at Jobcare made all the difference. My first interaction with this wonderful organisation was at a Jobcare Connects networking event. At this gathering business guests, coaches and Jobcare facilitators provided us with a fantastic opportunity to network and gain insights from likeminded individuals in our professional sectors. In January 2026 I participated on a 7-week Jobnet course where my fellow course participants and I learned vital tips and tricks to support our career returns. The team at Jobcare designed a programme to support us across a range of topics pertinent to our job search helping us to:

- Craft engaging and targeted CVs. Unlike many European countries, in Ireland there is no requirement for a cheesy photo, and a CV should be no longer than 2 pages focusing on key words, skills and experience pertinent to the job application.
- Lean into AI to support the application process but to be aware of its limitations
- Finesse our LinkedIn profiles to highlight and promote our key skills and experience and to use LinkedIn Premium for connections, learning, job search metrics and so much more.
- Maximise every networking opportunity as Ireland is still a small country where usually somebody knows somebody, and people are generally very helpful and supportive.
- Nail the interview process through a series of mock interviews using the STAR technique.

We heard from recruiters, career coaches, business leaders from Google, Workday and LinkedIn to name a few all of whom offered inspired insights, fresh thinking and valuable tips so important to our job searches.

I came away from the course with sharpened focus, energy and determination to succeed in my career return. And I'm delighted to say that 3 weeks after the course ended, I received a great job offer in my chosen sector and I will be starting next week. I can honestly say that the wonderful team of facilitators and volunteers at Jobcare made all the difference. The motto at Jobcare is 'Working Matters' and the team are doing an amazing job to ensure that everyone who joins their programmes has the tools to navigate the job market and secure meaningful work. I cannot recommend this course highly enough.



# What We Learned

Three years of delivery across five very different projects generated learning that a single year of funding could not. The awardees worked with distinct groups of women, migrant and refugee women, Traveller women, lone parents, and women in rural and disadvantaged communities, yet strikingly similar lessons surfaced across the portfolio. Together they tell us something about what it takes to support women furthest from the labour market, and about how philanthropic funding can best enable that work.

## Progression is rarely linear, and education is often the first step towards employment.

Awardees consistently found that the journey into work takes longer for women balancing caring responsibilities, low confidence and other barriers, and that it seldom runs in a straight line. One Family put it most plainly: for many of the lone parents it works with, education is the first step on the road to employment, especially for women who have been out of work for a long time, and the project came to count progression into education as an outcome

in its own right rather than a staging post. EQUAL Ireland saw the same pattern in rural communities, where many women moved first into further training or preparatory business supports, each step a genuine advance towards longer-term employment even where a job did not immediately follow.

## Employability has to be defined on women's own terms.

Saoirse offers the clearest example. The project began with a definition of success centred on securing full-time work, but in practice many of the migrant women it supports are parents and carers whose goal is part-time or flexible work that fits around their families. Through discussion with the fund management team, Saoirse reshaped its definition of success to reflect what employability genuinely means for the women in its programme. EQUAL Ireland reached a similar conclusion from a different direction, as growing numbers of participants expressed interest in self-employment, flexible work and online freelance opportunities, prompting the project to support women towards those routes rather than employment alone.

## Confidence and wellbeing are prerequisites, not extras.

Awardees found that personal development and wellbeing were not soft additions to the “real” work of training and job-seeking, but the very things that made engagement possible. Jobcare’s pre and post assessments revealed that the rise in confidence was more pronounced for women than for men, as women tended to rate their confidence low at the outset, underlining confidence building as a decisive early step. For Meath Travellers Workshops, demand for health and wellbeing activity ran higher than anticipated, and the project came to see that supporting a woman’s wellbeing was frequently the first thing that allowed her to engage with education or employment at all.

## Multi-year funding enabled organisational depth, not just delivery.

The three-year horizon allowed awardees to strengthen the organisations behind the projects, not only to run them. EQUAL Ireland used the business supports to develop a new Strategic Plan and Theory of Change, build a communications strategy, and strengthen its governance through new Board appointments. For Saoirse, this was a first experience of managing a multi-year grant, which strengthened its governance, financial systems and planning, and left it able to demonstrate to future funders that it can manage multi-year funding. Across the portfolio, organisational capacity rose over the fund, with the sharpest gains in the areas where awardees began from the lowest base, particularly scaling and impact management.

## Impact measurement matured across the portfolio.

For several awardees, the fund embedded measurement as a lasting discipline. Saoirse standardised its data collection and introduced quarterly internal reporting, describing measurement as now part of how the organisation works rather than something done for a funder.

Jobcare integrated its participant and follow-up data into a single system to track progression and trends more rigorously. Awardees were candid, too, about the limits of numbers alone, with several noting that testimonials and case studies were needed to capture change that quantitative data could not.

This points to what future funding in this area can build on. The fund’s experience suggests that impact for women furthest from the labour market depends on three things above all: holistic support that treats confidence, wellbeing and caring realities as central rather than peripheral; multi-year investment that lets impact deepen while the organisations delivering it are strengthened to sustain it; and a deliberate focus on the small, community-led organisations, many grounded in the lived experience of the women they serve, that are best placed to reach these women and hold their trust. The Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Empowerment Fund is evidence that this approach works. Its lessons are offered here in the hope that they inform not only Rethink Ireland’s future funds, but the wider effort to build a labour market that leaves no woman behind.





# Thank You to Our Donors

The Mná na hÉireann Fund has been a flagship partnership for Rethink Ireland over the past seven years.

The impact of these successive funds is testament to the power of public-private partnership, and we would like to thank our donors Bank of America and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht for their continued support.

Most recently, the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Empowerment Fund set out to reach those women furthest from the labour market over three years, and it delivered.

More than 880 women accessed education and training, and over 350 gained employment.

Behind those figures are women who gained a qualification, a first job in Ireland, or a route back to paid work after years spent parenting or caring for relatives. Underpinning every one of those outcomes was a quieter achievement: the confidence and self-belief that the awardees consistently reported, and which, for women who had rarely been given reason to believe in their own capabilities, was the first and most important step of all.

The fund also strengthened the organisations behind this work. The five awardee organisations ended the fund more strategic, more visible and better able to understand and sustain their own impact than when they began. This is the distinct value of Rethink Ireland's venture philanthropy model – investing not only in what these organisations do, but in what they are able to become.

The barriers these women face – in childcare, location and transport, discrimination and financial insecurity – are structural, and no single fund can

erase them all. But the Mná na hÉireann, Women of Ireland Empowerment Fund demonstrates what is possible when targeted, holistic, multi-year support is put in the hands of organisations that support these women and hold their trust. The insights and lessons offered in this report are not intended as an endpoint, but rather as a foundation for funds and initiatives that follow, and as a contribution to the wider effort to ensure that no woman is left behind.

In recognition of the impact achieved through the fund and the ongoing need for support, Bank of America recently committed additional funding to the Mná na hÉireann partnership, enabling four awardees – EQUAL Ireland, Jobcare, Meath Travellers Workshops and Saoirse Ethnic Hands on Deck – to extend their work until July 2027. This further investment will help deepen their impact and extend opportunities for people facing barriers to employment and economic participation. We are extremely grateful and proud to partner with Bank of America and for its longstanding commitment to advancing equality and social progress.

**Deirdre Mortell**  
CEO, Rethink Ireland







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