



# The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

**The role of men and boys  
in advancing gender  
equality and breaking  
gender stereotypes**  
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Discussion paper – Ireland



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# Changing Gendered Social Norms in Ireland: Engaging Men and Boys

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## Introduction: Background and related policy context

Efforts to address gender inequality have in the past equated gender with women, to the neglect of men and masculinities as well as the role of underlying forms of gender knowledge (ideas about women and men's roles in society) that include gender stereotypical and inequitable norms ([Cullen and Corcoran 2020](#); [Cislaghi and Heise 2020](#)). Gender norms have featured as components of contemporary commitments to address gender inequality such as the [National Strategy for Women and Girls \(2017-2021\)](#) (NSWG)<sup>1</sup> produced by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth ([DCEDIY](#)) and as a central element of recommendations generated by the [Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality\(2019-2021\)](#) (CAGE) and its associated [Parliamentary \(Oireachtas\) Committee on Gender Equality](#) (OCGE). The engagement of men/boys is increasingly understood as central in promoting gender-transformation ([Ruane-McAteer et al 2019](#)) and until recently featured most often in Ireland in perpetrator interventions in domestic, sexual and gender based violence ([Oireachtas 2021](#)) and as elements of programmes on male mental health and specifically in a [National Men's Health Action Plan 2017-2021](#). Critical perspectives on Irish masculinities have drawn attention to how men's caring practices have been constrained by conservative ideology that construct caring as a primary obligation for women ([Hanlon 2018](#)) and regressive masculinities on and off line ([Ging 2017](#)). There is evidence that some Irish men are moving away from rigid and stereotypical notions of masculinity to a more fluid and progressive construct ([Darcy 2019](#)). Men's attitudes to equality and caring have changed especially in terms of their involvement with their children yet change in how gender and care are practiced in Irish society can be characterised as slow and uneven ([Smyth and Russell 2021](#)). In its application of the [March 2021 OECD report, "Man Enough? Measuring Masculine Norms to Promote Women's Empowerment"](#), under its Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) series, Ireland indicated its commitment to identify and map the presence and consequences of 'restrictive masculinity' in the Irish context. The [OECD report](#) identified ten norms of restrictive masculinity in the political, economic and private

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<sup>11</sup> The previous National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017- 2020 was extended to the end of 2021 with an independent evaluation of the strategy taking place in 2022-3.

spheres, and includes a roadmap for efforts to measure changing norms of masculinities to inform transformative policies supporting gender-equitable norms of masculinity. [The application of the framework in Ireland](#) by [DCEDIY](#) illuminated data gaps in measuring changes in gender norms and challenges in communicating the benefits of gender equality to men and boys in ways that enable their engagement with positive masculinities. In this mutual learning assessment, I evaluate Ireland's efforts to recognise how inequitable gender norms reflect and perpetuate inequitable power relations that are often disadvantageous to women and the role of men and boys in these processes. I draw attention to examples of good practice and areas for improvement in terms of problem definition (including argumentation and approach to gender transformation), policy formulation and implementation in terms of partnership, process and public engagement and communication. While there has been a significant and recent history of progress on gender equality that includes the removal of a prohibition on abortion evidence of stagnation in progress in women's economic equality ([England et al 2020](#)) and access to decision making ([EIGE 2022](#)) are notable. Undermining traditional gender norms has the potential to increase men's participation in household and care work, address men's over representation in economic and political decision making, encourage governmental provision of care, and the adoption by employers of policies that reduce gender discrimination and help both women and men combine jobs with care responsibilities ([England et al 2020](#)).

## **1. Gender norms have material effects: care, employment and economic inequality**

### **1.1 Gender Norms and the Feminisation of Care**

Ireland can be characterised as a hybrid welfare system that combines strong liberal characteristics with conservative and Catholic features and a strong if modified male breadwinner welfare regime ([McGauran 2021](#)). The feminisation of care is a core element of gender norms and an embedded feature of the Irish gender regime limiting women's participation in economic, political and cultural life and constraining men's engagement in caring ([Hanlon 2018](#)). The ideological framing of caring as women's responsibility was written into the [Irish Constitution \(Government of Ireland 1937\)](#). Excluding the notion of care as a wider social obligation or a responsibility for men 'the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved' (41.2.1). Furthermore, the State endeavours to ensure 'that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home' (41.2.2). Codified in Constitutional terms, deep cultural assumptions of women as society's natural carers, strong norms eschewing anything but fulltime paid work for men ([Smyth and Russell 2021](#)) combined with the gender income gap, means women fill the gap left by low state funding of care ([Russell et al 2019](#)). On average women spend double the time of men on caring and more than twice as much time on

housework ([Russell et al 2019](#)).<sup>2</sup> Between 2007 and 2011 the time spent caring by men rose, but this returned to 2007 levels in 2016, suggesting this was a response to the economic shock of the recession rather than an underlying shift in behaviour ([Russell et al 2019](#)). Working longer hours is a barrier to fathers' involvement in childcare. Fathers who had availed of family-friendly working practices (such as flexible hours) when the child was five years old were still more involved in their children's lives four years later. Fathers who adopted a more traditional view of their role, emphasising their financial responsibility as a father, tended to be less involved with their children and had less positive relationships with them ([Smyth and Russell 2021](#)).

As of 2021, 57% of women in Ireland aged 25–64 years old were educated to the tertiary level, far higher than the EU-27 average of 36% ([Barrett et al 2022](#)). 70% of Irish women and 80% of Irish men were employed in 2021. Comparable figures for the EU-27 were 68% (women) and 79% (men). However, average weekly hours worked by women – at 33 – is lower than that of women in the EU ([Barret et al 2022, p.2](#)). In 2020 the main reason that women gave for labour force inactivity was care responsibilities ([Eurostat 2021](#)). Caring responsibilities clearly impact women's choices around paid work, education and training and are a driver of high levels of involuntary, part-time work ([Doorley et al 2021](#); [Barry 2021](#)). Irish Labour Force Survey data for Q1 2022 indicated that the current participation rate for women was nearer 60%, ten percentage points lower ([CSO 2022](#)). Covid-19 data for Ireland in 2021 revealed although women continue to bear the brunt of childcare, the share of men intensively caring for children every day was among the largest in the EU, at 9 pp above the EU average ([EIGE 2022](#)). However, only 23 % of men reported taking care for and supervising children aged 0–11 completely or mostly themselves, while 66 % of women responded doing so, pointing to grave gender inequalities in the distribution of childcare among women and men ([EIGE 2022](#)). An [Early Childhood Care and Education Programme \(ECCE\) programme](#) is a universal two-year pre-school programme available to all children over the age of 2 years and 8mths for three hours per day, five days per week over 38 weeks per year (between September and June). The time limitations and absence of eligibility for children below that age places specific limitations on working parents. Aside from a [conditional subsidised after school programme](#) for those on low incomes or on state income supports, there is no publicly funded after school in a context where the school day (ending at lunchtime for younger children) [falls short of the majority of working hours](#). As such many parents rely on expensive privatised options ([Doorley et al 2021](#)). Ireland relies on a privatised care system for example with 99% of children attending pre-primary education (aged three to five years) enrolled in private childcare institutions in comparison to the OECD average of 34% ([OLS 2020](#)). This contributes to low wages for educators and high fees for consumers together placing a reliance on a female

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<sup>2</sup> Ireland [has the third highest weekly hours of unpaid work](#) for both women and men across the EU27 ([EU Commission 2021](#)).

dominated low paid care workforce and on women to absorb the majority of unpaid care. Affordability of childcare remains the single largest barrier to women taking up paid work and represents a particular barrier to lone parents ([Sweeney et al 2022](#)). Mothers who face high childcare costs work fewer hours ([Russell et al 2018](#)). A [national childcare scheme](#) introduced in 2019, marked the first state intervention on childcare to subsidise costs as well as state efforts to invest in an early education workforce model and a [2022 freeze on child care fees](#). These have improved access to childcare for some low income families, yet fees remain among the highest in EU absorbing more than a third of average household income ([OECD 2021](#)).

## 1.2 Gender Norms and Gender Income Gap

Progress in the area of economic equality between women and men has been slow ([EIGE 2022](#)). The raw Irish gender pay gap, measured as the percentage difference between average male and female hourly wages was 14% in 2018. An adjusted measure of the gender wage gap, which accounts for different labour market characteristics, puts the Irish gender wage gap closer to 11%, ([Redmond and McGuinness 2019](#)) however this hides a good deal of variance across occupations ([Russell 2022](#)). Notably, the gender gap in market income – defined as earnings plus private pensions plus investment income far exceeds the EU average at close to 50% ([Doorley et al 2022](#)). A gender pension gap of 35% persists as women are less likely to receive a private or occupational pension associated with high earning and uninterrupted and full-time employment across the life course. 93 per cent of retired men had worked for more than 30 years, compared to 33 per cent of retired women ([Nolan et al 2019](#); [McGauran 2021](#)). The power of societal expectations and gender stereotypes in contributing to gender differences in education and occupational choices has also been established in Ireland where gender segregation in occupational terms is significant ( [Doris 2019](#); [McCoy et al 2021](#)) One stark example of occupational segregation is the apprenticeship sector, where only [6% of apprentices in Ireland are women](#).<sup>3</sup> Income inequality in Ireland is then a deeply gendered phenomena with 6 out of 10 low paid workers are women ([Eurostat 2022](#)). While Covid-19 has had mixed gender effects on women and men's income and earning women's wages declined by more than men's ([Doorley et al 2020](#)). Disabled women, Traveller, ethnic and racial minority and migrant women experience specific discrimination and disadvantage in relation to income ([Russell et al 2017](#)). A narrowing of aspects of the gender wage gap did coincide with the [introduction of minimum wages](#) and partial individualisation of the income tax system ([Doorley et al.2018](#)) indicating that policy changes including full individualisation of the taxation system could lead to additional narrowing ([Barret et al 2022, p10](#)). The introduction from [2022 of gender pay gap reporting obligations](#) and [recent pension reforms](#), while addressing some gender issues leave others unaddressed including state subsidies

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<sup>3</sup> [An Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025](#) includes measures to reduce gender imbalances, such as a gender-based bursary scheme for the employers of apprentices on any national apprenticeship programme with greater than 80% representation of a single gender.

that go to private pensions that disproportionately favour men ([Collins 2020](#)). A range of inconsistencies in the treatment of women, particularly in their status as qualified adults rather than individually assessed recipients of income support, are a central part of the male breadwinner model and remain a key feature of the social welfare system ([Barret et al 2022,p.11](#)) that compounds gender stereotypical patterns of work and care.

### 1.3 Gender norms shape policies and practices: family leave and flexible work

Payments for family leave in Ireland are [much lower than EU norms](#) and there is a larger gap between the end of paid leave and the start of Early Years services ([Library and Research Service 2021,pp.18-21](#)). Since 1 September 2020, both parents can take up to 26 weeks unpaid parental leave.<sup>4</sup> The Family Leave Act 2021 extended [Parent's Leave](#) to 7 weeks per parent during the first 2 years of a child's life and is supported by a paternity benefit payment.<sup>5</sup> It is not possible to transfer entitlement between parents currently under Parent's Leave or Parental Leave. [Paternity leave](#) gives new parents 2 weeks off work an employer does not have to pay during paternity leave, however with the requisite social insurance contributions parents may qualify for [Paternity Benefit](#). [Proposed legislation](#) to align with the [EU Directive on Work Life Balance](#) will give parents and carers of children under twelve the right to request (rather than access) flexible work. However, when Maternity, Paternity and Parent's Leave are taken into account, paid leave still does not cover the first year of a child's life for a two-parent family ([Daly and Szelewa 2020](#)). The income replacement rate of paid leave is also well below the EU average with maternity leave payments the lowest in the EU replacing less than a third of average earnings ([OECD 2021](#)). This is acknowledged [as a key factor](#) in decisions to access leave, particularly for lone parents who are solely responsible for their household income and for fathers in low incomes families or who are self-employed ([Köppe,2023](#)). Almost one in two fathers did not avail of paid paternity leave in 2018 ([Eurostat 2020](#)). Aside from low compensation levels, a lack of flexibility in the timing of leave; eligibility criteria (e.g. employment length), cultural norms and perceptions about gender roles in child rearing and are understood to act as a strong disincentive to taking leave (Janta and [Stewart](#) 2018). This is reflected in Irish [media](#) accounts.

### 1.4 Gender Norms shape access to power: leadership and decision making

Gender inequalities are strongly pronounced in the domain of power ([EIGE 2021](#)). Despite the introduction in [2012, of the Electoral \(Amendment\) \(Political Funding\) Act](#)

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<sup>4</sup> In 2016, a paid Paternity Leave of two weeks was introduced as a social insurance scheme, and in 2017 approximately 43 per cent of new fathers took this.

<sup>5</sup> Paternity leave is available to new parents of children under 6 months of age with the potential to access a payment.



that introduced female election candidate quota Ireland ranks 20<sup>th</sup> among the 27 EU Member States for women's political representation in the Lower House of Parliament and in an international ranking for women's representation in parliament, [Ireland sits in 101<sup>th</sup> position](#). Women hold 23% of seats in the lower house and 24% of seats in local government. Traveller, Ethnic minority and migrant women [are largely excluded](#) from local and national elected roles ([Cullen and Gough 2022](#)). Measures that tangentially address masculinist gender norms on leadership include grants to support local [female candidacy in politics](#) and legislation on [maternity leave](#) for local politicians, both advanced by [the Department of Planning and Local Government](#).<sup>6</sup> However these do not apply at the national level and there remains no provision for paternity leave. Progress has been made on increasing women's representation on public boards with 194 public boards with an overall [female membership profile of 45% in 2022](#). However, this masks wide variation on board gender representation ([Bereky et al 2022](#)). A government-initiated target led approach to female representation in [corporate decision making](#) resulted in a shift from 18% to 34% in female representation in ISEQ 20 companies. However, this mainly relates to non-executive positions ([NWC 2021](#)) with uncertain trajectory for more gender transformative outcomes ([Engeli and Mazur 2022](#)). [CAGE](#) and the [OCGE](#) recommended mandatory gender data collection, gender equality action plans and gender quotas of 40% to accelerate progress on women's access to decision making and leadership in Ireland. This would apply to both public and private companies in line with and to exceed requirements of the European Directive on Gender Balance in Corporate Boards ([OCGE 2022](#) pp.110-115). Tackling the role of gender norms in promotional criteria, organisational culture and curriculum are evident in elements of gender equality and leadership initiatives in higher education advanced by the [Department of Further and Higher Education](#) and the [Irish Higher Education Authority](#).<sup>7</sup> These include rules that [link access](#) to research funding with gender equality profile,<sup>8</sup> and the attainment of [Athena Swan](#). Frameworks on [consent and sexual harassment](#) are also featured.<sup>9</sup> As part of this a 2022 [National Review of Gender Equality](#) in Higher Education found while targets have been set in most Higher Education Institutions there were few positive action interventions evident to achieve targets, limits in gender disaggregated data and less clear progress on building gender awareness among staff, pedagogy and curriculum.

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<sup>6</sup> Legislation is being considered to introduce [remote voting](#) in the Irish Parliament to support more family friendly working conditions.

<sup>7</sup> The HEA has awarded funding of €782,755 since 2020 under the Gender Equality Enhancement Fund to advance gender equality initiatives in Irish higher education.

<sup>8</sup> [In 2022 this included an Engaging men in building gender equality – the development of a pilot programme in Irish HEIs](#)

<sup>9</sup> Technological Higher Education Association also participate <https://www.thea.ie/gender-policy/>



## 2. Good practice: Citizen Led Deliberation on Gender Equality

### 2.1 The Citizens' Assembly and the Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality

In 2019 the Irish Parliament agreed to establish a [Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality](#) (2020-2021 ([CAGE](#))) to consider gender equality issues in Ireland. [The Oireachtas resolution establishing the Citizens' Assembly](#) acknowledged the role of *traditional norms and stereotypes in perpetuating gender inequality*, asking the Assembly for recommendations which would 'challenge the remaining barriers and social norms and attitudes that facilitate gender discrimination towards girls and boys, women and men.' The [CAGE](#) was asked to prioritise 'policy, legislative or constitutional change.'<sup>10</sup> The [CAGE](#) engaged with a representative sample of citizens, a public consultation process and inputs from interest groups, researchers and people with lived experiences in a year and half long deliberative process to consider gender equality in Irish society and produce recommendations for change. Gender norms and stereotypes featured [across the CAGE recommendations](#). The [CAGE's](#) work was published in a Report in April 2021 and led to the establishment of the Joint Oireachtas (Parliamentary) Committee on Gender Equality to consider its recommendations ([OCGE](#)). The [OCGE](#) worked to create an action plan to implement the [CAGE](#) recommendations.<sup>11</sup> One of the most relevant aspects of these processes is the recommendation to delete the provision referring to women's life within the home (Recommendation 4.3 to amend Article 41.2) in order to make it *gender neutral* while continuing to 'support care within the home and wider community' with recommended wording to be put to the Irish electorate in a constitutional referendum in 2023. This has been identified by Ireland as an action on gender norms where a commitment exists (Action 3.1 of the [NSWG](#) to hold a referendum on Article 41.2.1 of Bunreacht na hÉireann (the Constitution of Ireland) regarding a "woman's life within the home"( Ireland fact sheet).

The [OCGE](#) action plan contains recommendations on *Norms, Stereotypes and Education* (26- 31) that included action across the education system to eliminate harmful gender stereotypes, ensure that subject choice and career information for students is not limited by gender, and to provide equitable access to education for all. Ireland is an outlier with high proportion of schools that retain a religious ethos and [single sex education, 17% at primary and 30% at post-primary](#) with specific

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<sup>10</sup> A notable element was [the commitment from citizens'](#) to direct public resources to secure these goals.

<sup>11</sup> The Oireachtas Committee met in 2022 holding a range of hearings to consider the 45 recommendations produced by the Citizens' Assembly. Other recommendations included on Care and Social Protection ((4-19). Pay and Workplace Conditions (32-36); and Leadership in Politics, Public Life and the Workplace (20-25).

implications for gender norm socialisation and [material outcomes for subject and career choice](#). In response to the [OCGE](#) the Minister for Education and the [National Council for Curriculum and Assessment \(NCCA\)](#), underlined [commitments](#) underway to revise curriculum on social and personal relationships and sexuality education. The importance of SPHE and RSE (Social Personal, Health, Relationships and Sexuality Education) for promoting progressive gender norms, and engaging young men and boys in gender equality is well established ([UNESCO 2018](#); [WHO 2021](#)).

The [OCGE](#) aligning with a [Report of the Commission on Taxation and Welfare 2022](#) also recommended increasing parental payments levels to encourage increased take up by men and a review all payments in respect of maternity, paternity and parental leave to be paid as a percentage of the parent's wage ([OCGE 2022](#), p.13). Other recommendations included extending maternity and introducing paternity and parental leave for all elected representatives, applying a 40% gender quota to all elections including nested gender quotas for ethnic minority female candidates ([OCGE](#), 2022 p. 111, 113-114).

The [OCGE](#) also set out recommendations on the implementation of gender-proofing principles within public finance policy; including the establishment of an independent budgetary advisory group and on the collection of data on equality issues ([OCGE final report](#) p.127-138). Many of the recommendations of both the [CAGE](#) and the [OCGE](#) included valuing and compensating care in society (including public funding of care including an increase the State share of GDP spent on childcare, from the current 0.37% of GDP to at least 1% by no later than 2030) to encourage men to take on more of the responsibilities and rewards of care including entering caring professions ([OCGE final report](#) 2022 pp.77-107).

Citizens' Assemblies are considered significant contexts for advancing intractable policy issues with particular success in the Ireland in the biopolitical and environmental context including securing change through constitutional referenda ([Reidy, Suiter, Elkind, & Farrell, 2021](#); [Courant 2021](#)). The [independent evaluation of CAGE](#) drew attention to a lack of diversity in sampling of citizen participants, yet overall the process was lauded as including a diverse range of expertise and input and generating citizen led outcomes to address substantive change on gender equality. Linking the outcomes of citizen led process on gender equality ([CAGE](#)) to a Parliamentary process ([OCGE](#)) dedicated to gender equality was momentous as Ireland has no statutory gender equality agency or cabinet role dedicated to same. The [OCGE](#) recommended the establishment of such a statutory body for gender equality (42) ([OCGE final report](#) 2022,p.32). Research confirms that such gender equality machineries are crucial in achieving more gender-transformative policy outcomes ([Bustelo and Mazur 2023](#)).

## 2.2 Good Practice and potential areas for progress: Partnership, Collaboration and Co-Design

### *The Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality: Consultative Practices*

The [OCGE](#) used a novel model of consultative process with stakeholders, academics, Government Ministers and officials, civil society organisations and those with relevant lived experiences on a range of issues and policy areas relevant to gender equality. The committee was particularly innovative in its use of an iterative form of consultation with specific stakeholders on the wording for constitutional amendments to give effect to recommendations 1-3 of the Assembly regarding the Constitution.

The [NSWG 2017-2021](#) its [predecessors](#) and [other governmental strategies](#) may be viewed as high level guide wires for policy yet they have been hindered by the absence of key performance indicators, targets, inputs or resources allocated to actions and timelines. While they have included periodic consultative fora these have lacked capacity to shape the direction and implementation of policy. Strategies have also been aligned with specific governmental departments or cabinet portfolios rather than as whole government initiatives. This can also lead to an uneven implementation of policy, that undermines capacity to deliver comprehensive services and supports and can lead to data deficits.

### *Third National Strategy on Domestic. Sexual and Gender Based Violence: Partnership and Co-Design*

The [Third National Strategy on Domestic. Sexual and Gender Based Violence](#) (2022-2026), ([TNSDSGBV](#)) published in June 2022 advanced by the [Department of Justice](#), is aimed at moving Ireland towards meeting its full obligations under the Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women, the [Istanbul Convention](#).<sup>12</sup> The [TNSDSGBV](#) is informed by a Zero Tolerance principle and has been positively evaluated by stakeholders in using in-depth consultation, collaborative and a codesign process with civil society and frontline services. This co-design process is planned to continue in implementation and for the [TNSDSGBV](#) to be a living document where new actions can be added over time ([TNSDSGBV](#) 2022, p.13, p.45). The [TNSDSGBV](#) Prevention Pillar includes an objective addressing social norms on masculinity and measures aimed at engaging men and boys on issues of sexual consent through an updated education curricula and public awareness campaigns to challenge existing myths ([TNSDSGBV](#) Implementation Plan, 2022, p.3-9; 26-27). The [TNSDSGBV](#) marks a break from other strategies **in its accompanying implementation plan** that contains 144 actions to be implemented in 2023 and new high level oversight structures including senior cabinet level political oversight. The establishment of a new **statutory agency** is also novel in that it aims to create permanency and enable cooperation across several departments ([TNSDSGBV](#) 2022, p.22). These elements have not characterised the delivery of prior strategies,

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<sup>12</sup> Ireland has also adopted multiple policy and legal changes aligning with the Convention's provisions.

however, specific costed resources for delivery of the components are less apparent. It will require significant ongoing state investment across all Departments to achieve its ambitions.

*The Women's Health Task Force: radical and grounded collaboration*

The [Women's Health Task Force](#) (WHTF) advanced by the [Department of Health](#) is also innovative in its methodologies that included a collaborative mechanism in its development and an independent researcher-led [radical listening exercise with women](#) on their views and experiences of the health system. Originating from a recommendation from [the Scoping Inquiry](#) in to health care screening (Cervical Check Screening Programme) that revealed paternalistic norms and behaviours towards women's health, the WHTF subsequently developed a [Women's Health Action Plan 2022-2023](#) (WHAP 2022) and [Implementation Approach](#). The Implementation approach lacks detail but contains commitments that it will be led by senior leadership and includes targets and aims to maintain women's participation in delivering outcomes.

Strengths of both [Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence](#) and the [Women's Health Task Force](#) include a departure from less inclusive and impactful consultation in other strategies including the [NSWG](#). This is reflected in more tangible and target led content. If this is actualised and resources are committed to implementation there is the potential to dis-embed paternalistic gender norms in medical and health care organisation, culture and practice ([WHAP 2022](#), p.36) and increase societal support for Zero Tolerance to DSGBV.

All governmental equality strategies including the next [NSWG](#) are currently being independently evaluated for potential intersectoral linkages. This will involve a consultative process to assist in identifying priorities. There are stated commitments to create a more cross sectoral and synergistic relationship across equality strategies as well as a current [review of Equality legislation](#) and the development of an [Equality data strategy](#). However, these initiatives are at an early stage of progress or have slowed and it is unclear how they will align to influence and support policy. A significant opportunity arises in creating a whole government approach to their development at the same time as exploring possibilities to narrow the range of issues addressed alongside more substantive targets and timelines. Leadership by head of government in progressing such strategies, in particular a commitment to gender impact assessments and or equality budgeting is key to motivating sustainable cultural and organisational change in policy making. This was a missed opportunity in other recent processes including Ireland's [National Recovery and Resilience Programme](#). Commendable efforts include DCEDIY's request for expertise in equality budgeting and gender impact assessment under the Technical Support Instrument

from Directorate General Reform.<sup>13</sup> Maintaining a reflex for co-design where possible and retention of existing expertise and embedding a cross departmental cooperation may address a perennial issue in government civil service where specific champions or expertise move to a different unit/department undermining learning and momentum ([Cullen 2020](#)).

### 3. Measuring Gender Norms in Ireland: The 6th Statistical Spotlight

The best practice included here for assessment includes a study by [the Research and Evaluation Unit](#) of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) that applied the [OECD indicator framework](#) used to measure masculine norms to existing Irish data. This exercise produced a report “[Gender norms in Ireland](#)”, published in December 2021 as the 6th report in its Statistical Spotlight series ([Spotlight](#)). It also held a webinar to debate the study as well as [a report that summarised the contributions](#) made. Ireland then became the first EU country to apply the OECD framework with a view to establishing a profile of the norms of restrictive masculinity in the political, economic, and private spheres. The Spotlight is best understood as a focused report that draws together data on one topic to highlight trends or patterns and is intended to inform measurement of changing norms of masculinities and policies aimed at supporting gender-equitable norms of masculinity. One aim was to illustrate how better data on ‘restrictive masculinities’ could enable policy makers to understand the factors that influence, for instance, the low uptake of paternity leave, how to increase female participation in politics and leadership roles and address retrograde attitudes on gender-based violence and consent. However, it is important to note that the issues of DSGBV and poverty were not included in the remit of the [Spotlight](#). Indicators drawing on the OECD framework were developed to gauge the degree of attitudinal and societal acceptance of restrictive and or positive masculinities. For example, attitudinal data found in survey data for the economic sphere included responses to statements such as “That the most important role of a man is to earn money” to capture sentiments regarding financial dominance and masculinity. A key aim was to establish an evidence-based approach to policy making in women’s empowerment and gender equality drawing in part on attitudinal data on the prevalence of restrictive masculinities, as well as data that highlighted the possible consequences these attitudes can have on women living in Ireland. Where possible, the findings were compared with data from other European countries, to assess Ireland’s progress amongst its peers- with comparisons placing Ireland in the context of best and worst progress. Useful summations of the data were also included to draw links and establish a trajectory of change or persistence of

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<sup>13</sup> Ireland requested support for Strengthening gender and equality proofing in Ireland throughout the policy cycle under the Technical Support Instrument (TSI), DG REFORM under Regulation (EU) 2021/240.

retrograde attitudes and or restrictive gender normative practices. Data assessing legal frameworks that both promote and constrain the impacts of restrictive masculine norms could also be found in the Appendix to the [Spotlight](#).

### 3.1 Assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the policy

Specific strengths of the [Spotlight](#) include scaffolding the data with an explanation of the constructs used to measure restrictive masculinities and a clear articulation of the relationship between possible consequences of same for women living in Ireland. As data from Ireland is only available for a small minority of the OECD indicators, with data gaps particularly prevalent in the private spheres, the authors constructed proxy indicators where data was limited or unavailable. This is another specific strength of the [Spotlight](#) in underlining current data gaps as well as producing proxies for five public and five private sphere norms of restrictive masculinities.<sup>14</sup>

The [Spotlight](#) data revealed progress on some gender norms, reflected in increased female labour force participation ([Spotlight](#) p. 12) and attitudinal data that indicated strong approval for more gender equity in sharing of care ([Spotlight](#) p. 44). However, the report included additional data to contextualise or deepen the assessment. For example, providing data not just on female labour force participation but also percentage of women in low paid work (p.12) employment rates for women and men by number and age of children (pp14-15), rates of part-time employment and gender disaggregated data for stated reasons for those not seeking employment and for part time employment (pp.15-16). These later data points reveal the implications of care responsibilities and family size on restricting women's access to employment ([Spotlight](#) p. 14-16). Setting this data side by side within the framework of gender norms has important explanatory power especially when accompanied by attitudinal data that showed: strong support for male breadwinner roles ([Spotlight](#) p. 13) and assumptions of women as natural carers (p.17); less value placed on women's work compared to men's (p.28) and strong occupational based gender segregation, p.40. Data on the low uptake of parental leave and paternity benefit by occupational category (p.45) also offered important nuance to raise questions about low pay as an inhibiting factor. Contradictory data also raised additional questions about tensions between high levels of approval of sharing household work (p.57) and data revealing gender imbalance in actual unpaid care work (p.58). Other data points suggested underlying attitudinal resistance to gender equality. This included data confirming low levels of female representation in leadership and public life placed alongside attitudinal data suggesting the persistence of masculinist constructs of leadership and an overestimation of progress on gender equality in general and leadership in

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<sup>14</sup> Captured in constructs that include: a real man should 1 Be the breadwinner; Not do unpaid care and domestic work; Be financially dominant; Have the final say in household decisions; Work in "manly" jobs ; Protect and exercise guardianship; Be the "ideal worker"; Dominate sexual and reproductive choices; Be a "manly" leader; Control household assets.



particular (p.38-39). Other notable attitudinal data included for a significant minority, poor understanding of sexual consent and support for regressive ideas about gender-based violence (p.64). This later data is instructive, as the last comprehensive study on sexual violence was conducted in 2002 in the SAVI report [on Sexual Abuse & Violence in Ireland](#). As such the [Spotlight](#) may inform a [new study](#) being conducted by the Central Statistics Office ([CSO](#)) in Ireland. A central merit of the [Spotlight](#) then is its role to act as a baseline to measure progress and in its potential to inform future policy.

The [Spotlight](#) did not include policy analysis or recommendations. However, a [webinar](#)<sup>15</sup> that included state officials and civil society representative was held with a [subsequent report](#) capturing debate and recommendations. These included making sharing of parental leave mandatory and placing care at the centre of policy debates in ways that promote flexible and gender equal workplaces. A [specific focus](#) was placed on engaging men and boys with participants calling for awareness raising through well-resourced and comprehensive “fact-based” public campaigns to dispel myths about gender equality and explain the ‘why’ of embracing less restrictive gender norms. Exemplars noted include government Covid-19 pandemic campaigns in the area of DSGBV with participants underlining the centrality of engaging men and boys in transforming gender norms can play a key role in preventing violence against women and girls. Participants also called for a systematic review of data gaps with a specific focus on the private sphere. The webinar was an important venue to ventilate the report’s finding and [generated media attention](#) as well [as subsequent debate](#). Inclusion of civil society organisations offered some partnership opportunities, although the report was commissioned and executed independently by DCEDIY.

As the reference point for the [Spotlight](#) was the diverse range of OECD countries including those with strong systems of patriarchal control this created challenges for the authors to capture contemporary shifts in the Irish context. The lack of data in the private sphere specifically on the issue of care hampered efforts to assess fit between stated attitudinal (norms) and actual gendered practices. In seeking substitute data where data did not exist, compromises were made including a reliance on older data sets that may lag behind change on the ground for some areas. Variability in the time period at which data was collected, also limited aspects of measurement, for example a reliance on European Values Survey data some of which is dated 2016-2018 placed alongside more most recent CSO 2021 and Eurostat 2021 data.

### **3.2 A focus on norms – attitudinal change**

The Spotlight marked an innovative exercise in highlighting areas of attitudinal change or stagnation on gender equality and offers future opportunities for comparison with other OECD countries. The choice of the OECD framework was motivated by a desire

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<sup>15</sup> The webinar was attended by over 130 participants representing civil society organisations, research and academic institutions, trade unions and employer organisations, as well as Government Departments and State agencies, and the OECD.



to move away from narratives associated with so called 'toxic masculinities' to the measurement of broadly held gender norms and stereotypes that inhibit gender equal societal transformation. The application of the framework to Ireland also reflected an acknowledgement that slow progress on gender equality may be the result of deep-rooted attitudes reinforced and reproduced by institutional practices and policy making.

Caution has been raised about approaches that rely on social norms theory that connect attitudes to behaviour, absent a focus on other social factors ([Stewart et al 2021](#)). The [Spotlight](#) report aims to circumvent this by including information on practices such as the inclusion of data on parental leave take up by occupation to excavate gaps between stated preferences and behaviours and potential links to social, cultural and economic structures. However, the overall emphasis on norms places the emphasis on attitudinal approaches that carry risks of individualising responsibility for gender inequalities. The measurement of gender inequality in purely attitudinal terms can also lead to an over reliance on cognitive or attitudinal strategies that fail to unpick the gender relations and structures maintaining gender inequality ([Marx 2018](#)). Masculinities and femininities are lived and articulated in relation to one another, and within structural contexts that include low pay, long work hours culture, and limited public childcare. Research also confirms that male perceptions of societal expectations and relationships between men are highly regulated by regimes of masculinity in particular that can inhibit a shift to more progressive gender norms ([Brush and Miller 2019](#); [Thebaud and Pedulla 2016](#)). Descriptive norms that regulate masculinities are most likely to be captured in survey data at the cost of injunctive norms. Injunctive norms – that is, perceptions of sanctions that important peers, group gate-keepers, and leaders impose to enforce conformity and complicity, to compel or stymie change – are powerful structures and practices that also maintain gender inequality ([Hollander and Pascoe 2019](#)). Ireland's recent [media campaigns on DSGBV](#) and [bystander programmes in Higher Education](#) are examples of good practice to de-stabilise some aspects of injunctive norms and embed a lack of tolerance to misogyny and sexual harassment and violence. However, while personal narratives, bystander frameworks and role models can communicate impactful messaging on positive masculinities, they require additional messaging on how broader state and societal responses are required to enable such behavioural change. Statistical benchmarks when combined with other forms of evidence can help avoid operationalising restrictive masculinities and sexism as a question of personal attitudes working as the 'gender factor' in social problems ([Harrington 2021](#)). A focus on how norms are aligned to organisational and by extension political and economic forces is revealing. For example in how merit can be constructed as associated with working long hours and permitting career to dominate life to exclude any labour (e.g. reproductive) outside the workplace that has deeply gender unequal effects ([Sattari and Sandefur, 2019](#)). Notably, the [Spotlight](#) includes some reflection on how policies are framed in gendered terms and may reproduce, reinforce or disturb restrictive gender norms ([Cullen and Corcoran 2020](#)).

### 3.3 Data deficits – data gaps remain a significant barrier to progress on gender equality

The Spotlight report illustrated that perfect data is not required to initiate a dialogue on gender norms and or to add to existing debates on restrictive masculinities within a broader range of policy areas. Nevertheless, the lack of [gender disaggregated data](#) and data that includes ethnic identifiers in Ireland makes it difficult to devise appropriate policies and legislation ([Fahey et al 2019](#)). This also undermines data analysis that can recognise the diversity of women's and men's experiences including for subgroups such as lone parents. Processes such as the [CAGE](#), [Women's Health Task Force](#) and the [TNSDSGBV](#) underline gaps in equality data collection but also the relevance of data generated by civil society, independent research institutes and academics. Qualitative data can augment data for constituencies that are poorly captured in administrative data sets: including women classified as dependents in some income support programmes and the experience of minoritised women and men including those who are disabled or belong to ethnic minority or migrant communities. Such recognition is central to how we build a data strategy that can capture how gender norms are contextual and articulated intersectionally (class, race, ethnicity, sexuality etc.) and how gender transformative change is also experienced in differential ways.

Some of these issues are recognised in Ireland's [planned Equality Data Strategy](#) designed by the CSO and commitments made in the [WHTF](#) and the [TNSDSGBV](#). [Equality Budgeting](#) was piloted in 2018 by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and extended in 2019 to a broader range of processes including [an equality audit](#) in response to [EU initiatives](#). Connections to a [Well being Framework](#) may provide opportunities to assess budgetary decisions on the basis of well-being dimensions. However despite [recommendations from the OECD](#) here is no legal imperative to implement gender impact assessment processes ([beyond a public sector human rights duty](#)), as such their impact is difficult to track and evaluate. Aside from [data collected by the CSO](#), and practices in [HE](#) and [research](#) the gathering of sex-disaggregated data is not strongly embedded in Irish political culture, impeding access to a clear gender picture at organisational and systemic level ([EIGE 2022](#)). The [Budgeting Expert Advisory Group](#) and an [inter-departmental group for Equality Budgeting](#) need to be resourced, to facilitate the embedding of the initiative across all Government departments to ensure gender sensitive budgeting is a priority. Equality data is key to measurement and benchmarking essential in peer comparison and target led initiatives. However, it is imperative that establishing an evidence base is not the final destination.

## 4. Main questions and issues for debate at the meeting Policies, processes and problem definitions

Engaging men and boys in gender transformation is a complex process. While changes in what it means to be a man are evident, this may not include a reduction in the need to conform to specific ideas of masculinity within a community. Changes in gendered social norms do not inevitably move in a progressive direction – the opposite can also take place. It is also vital to adopt an intersectional approach when seeking to understand and engage with men and masculinities ([Burrell et al 2019](#)). There is a significant research gap in Ireland on these issues. Gender-transformative engagement with men and boys from an early age is crucial, that avoids deficit models. However, shifting gendered social norms requires organisational, community, institutional and structural change towards gender equality, as well as transformations among individuals and peers. ‘Masculine’ values are strongly embedded within many contexts and organisations for example through job segregation, sex discrimination, gender pay gaps, sexual harassment and a culture of overwork. Policymakers and practitioners should consider how they can embed gender-sensitive and gender-transformative approaches within different interventions – and not only those that explicitly seek to address gender issues ([Burrell et al 2019, pp.11-12](#)).

The approaches and initiatives reviewed here indicate an appetite to embrace new approaches that facilitate and support a shift away from restrictive masculinities. Statistical data in the [Spotlight](#) is used in constructive ways to expose tensions between attitudinal support for more positive masculine gender norms and the persistence of retrograde norms and practices on leadership, care, work and sexual violence. Benchmarking will require investment in additional and new forms of equality data collection. Communicating sticking points and or progress will require imaginative campaigns that animate data informed by sociological and behavioural scientific approaches. There is a clear need to embed gender and equality proofing and budgeting, and impact assessment to unearth gendered assumptions and effects underlying policies. This includes critical implementation and evaluation studies that identify the ‘theories of change’ that inform policy and are used by policy actors in implementation and evaluation ([Bustelo and Mazur 2023](#)). When combined with inclusive co-design with a range of intersectional interests the outcome can be gender transformative ([Engeli and Mazur 2018](#)). Such practices can also help close significant data deficits in Ireland and in doing so support excellent evidence-based policy making. Taking a broad view of what constitutes data and whose experiences are included can support resonant, efficacious, and inclusive communication strategies on the benefits of unsettling restrictive gender norms. Data can also help address over-estimation of change on gender inequality and equip advocates in efforts to dispel misinformation that feeds resistance to and backlash against gender equality ([Tidesley et al 2021](#)).

Questions for debate and reflection on transferability include: What good practices exist in other contexts in using equality data to inform policies on gender norm transformation? What role can whole or cross government approaches and the exchange of departmental expertise (i.e. national planning units) play in designing publicly funded services, supports and initiatives in: care, education and employment aimed at a de-traditionalisation of male gender roles and social expectations? For instance, how can services (e.g., antenatal, child welfare, education, and health) engage with fathers more actively and routinely? How could statutory footing (creation of dedicated state agencies or legal obligation) and or political assignation (ministerial position) be used to enhance the capacities and obligations of the state, employers, and public bodies to prioritise and facilitate positive gender norms?

Other questions for debate include: is there a role for citizen led deliberation and collaborative approaches in parliamentary committee contexts to help build legitimacy and support for positive gender norms? Given that even in contexts where male leave entitlements are more generous, take up remains low: What practices could ensure men use leave entitlements? What role is there for enhanced and better funded leave supports? How can employers be incentivised to promote flexible and gender equal workplaces? How can publicly funded affordable and accessible care assist in increased sharing of care? What role can reconfigured relationship and sexual consent education; subject provision, pathways to subject choice and career guidance play in desegregating further education and higher education options and undermining occupational gender segregation? What kinds of communicative strategies can be used to narrow the gap between 'perception and reality' on gender equality and communicate the implications of restrictive gender norms for women and men's wellbeing? What role can personal narratives and role models play in communicating positive masculinities? What role can government play alongside key stakeholders (e.g., employers and unions) to encourage and disseminate promising practice relating to work and care, as well as to address men directly through social communication strategies?