Gender Perspective in the National Reform Programme for Employment: Ireland

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## List of acronyms

BTEA     | Back to Education Allowance  
BTWA     | Back to Work Allowance     
BTWEA    | Back to Work Enterprise Allowance  
BTWS     | Back to Work Schemes  
COSC     | National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence  
CPA      | Combat Poverty Agency  
D/CEG    | Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs  
D/ETE    | Department of Enterprise Trade & Employment  
D/EJLR   | Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform  
D/F      | Department of Finance  
D/SFA    | Department of Social and Family Affairs  
D/SP     | Department of Social Protection  
D/T      | Department of Taoiseach (Prime Minister)  
EA       | Equality Authority  
ETW      | Expanding the Workforce  
EWM      | Equality for Women Measure  
FAS      | National Training Authority  
GPP      | Graduate Placement Programme  
ICTU     | Irish Congress of Trade Unions  
ICL      | Immigrant Council of Ireland  
INOU     | Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed  
INRP     | Irish National Reform Programme  
LR       | Live Register  
NAMA     | National Asset Management Agency  
NERA     | National Employment Rights Agency  
NRP      | National Reform Programme  
NDP      | National Development Plan  
NMW      | National Minimum Wage  
NWCI     | National Women’s Council of Ireland  
NSSPI    | National Report for Ireland on Strategies for Social Protection & Social Inclusion 2008-2010  
STWTP    | Short Time Working Time Programme
A.1. Executive summary

Ireland was the first EU country to be officially designated as ‘in recession’ in August 2008. The period since then has seen a deepening crisis reflected in the continued dramatic downturn in the Irish economy from a period of high employment growth paralleled by high GDP in the ten years to 2008 to one of extremely high levels of unemployment, significant contraction in employment and GDP levels and a deep crisis in public finances. Employment levels fell dramatically during 2009-10 and have experienced a further sustained contraction over the last few of months. Official unemployment rates have returned to the record levels of the late 1980s and there has been a return of significant net emigration. Public finances reached such a state of severe crisis that November 2010 the Irish government called on the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for emergency aid. Severe restrictions have subsequently been laid down in relation to public expenditure with the stated aim of attaining a reduced budget deficit to 3% of GDP by 2013. Following an ‘austerity’ budget in 2010, budget 2011 saw the introduction of a range of emergency measures aimed at reducing public expenditure and which have had the effect of increasing tax rates, reducing income and consumption levels across the economy. The scale of the banking crisis continues to undermine any possible policy initiatives towards economic recovery.

Latest unemployment data reveal an unemployment rate of 14.7% (March 2011) showing an increase of 1% in the last six months. Ireland now has the second highest unemployment rate in the EU (after Spain) and long-term unemployment has now reached over 50% of those unemployed. Unemployment and emigration rates among men are higher than among women, reflecting the complete collapse of the construction sector in particular. Through the imposition of a pension levy of around 10% on public sector employees, the introduction of a Universal Social Charge (USC) as well as a series of cutbacks in entitlements and in service provision, the government has attempted to regain control over a public financial system. Low and middle earners have seen a sharp reduction in income as a consequence of the USC as well as reductions in most welfare rates. Policies to address the deficit in public finances have been undermined by the dramatic reduction in taxation revenue (mainly from the property sector) coupled with the massive drain on resources by the process of recapitalisation of the failed banking sector.

Progressive social and economic policies, including gender equality policies and practices, have suffered as resources have been severely cutback. Women, who make up the majority of those on low pay, those living in poverty and workers in the lower paid sections of the public sector have been badly affected. Welfare payment rates have been significantly reduced, child benefit has been cut, unemployment payment rates for young people have been significantly reduced, the double ‘christmas’ welfare payment has been abolished, community and local area programmes have lost resources and budgets for important equality agencies and equality initiatives have been severely cut. After considerable pressure a cut in the National Minimum Wage from €8.60 to €7.60 has been reversed. Employment policy has shifted from a ‘pre-recession’ emphasis on increasing the supply of labour (through increasing women’s employment rate and net immigration) to a focus on registered unemployment with definite negative gender consequences. Overall economic policy has been dominated by the single
priority of reducing public expenditure with little evidence of a gender informed strategy to combat unemployment, address inequality or tackle poverty.

A.2 Recent changes in the economic situation, key indicators on employment and gender equality

Ireland was the first EU country to be officially designated as ‘in recession’ in August 2008. The period since then has seen a deepening crisis reflected in the dramatic downturn in the Irish economy from a period of high employment growth, paralleled by high GDP growth, to one of extremely high levels of unemployment, a very significant contraction in employment and GDP levels and an acute crisis in public finances. By November 2010, Ireland was forced to call for aid from the European Central Bank/EU and the International Monetary Fund who have since set down severe restrictions on Irish public finances setting down a limited period until 2013 to reduce the current deficit to 3% of GDP.

A key aspect of the continued crisis in public finances is the steep drop in taxation revenues during 2008-2010 (linked primarily to the drop in property taxes) while at the same time a huge commitment of state financial resources to what has been referred to as a ‘bail out’ of the banking sector through both nationalisation, capital injections and taking over of ‘bad loans’. The government’s two year guarantee (introduced in September 2008) of bank deposits and loans in the six main Irish-owned financial was renewed in September 2010. A series of measures have been taken since late 2009 designed to reduce the gap between revenue and expenditure, but which have brought about a substantial reduction in pay levels across the public sector, mirrored to a large extent by falling wage rates and employment levels across the private sector.

Against this background Budget 2011 saw the introduction of range of new measures aimed at continuing to address the budget deficit. From a gender equality perspective some of these measures can be viewed as having a negative impact. A key change has been the reduction of the minimum wage from €8.60 per hour to €7.60, a reduction which is having a negative impact on women, young people and migrant workers who constitute the majority of those on low pay. Young people have also been targeted by the reduction of Jobseekers Allowances to those under 23 years of age. A new Universal Social Charge (USC) was also introduced from January 2011 levied on the gross pay of all employees but disproportionately impacting on middle and lower income earners. Reductions in Child Benefit, particularly affecting larger families with three or more children were also introduced.
Table 1: Employment Rates by Sex and Age 1999; 2001; 2004; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010*

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The recession has clearly had a dramatic negative impact on Ireland’s employment rate. Employment has fallen across the Irish economy during 2009, 2010 and into 2011. Both men and women are affected by this fall. Women’s employment rate has fallen from a peak of 60.8 in 2007 to 57.0 in 2009 and to 56.1 in the third quarter of 2010. So, while Ireland had reached the Lisbon target of a 60% women’s employment rate in advance of the deadline, the economic crisis has reversed this and resulted in a sharp reduction in women’s employment rate from its 2008 peak. In a parallel manner men’s employment rate has also fallen from its peak in 2008 of 72.6 to 61.1 in 2009 and to 64.5 in third quarter of 2010. And, as the data also reveals, the scale of male job losses (particularly in construction) has reduced the overall gender gap in employment rates which has narrowed to just over eight percentage points (from a level of 14 percentage points) over the last two and a half years.

When the impact on different age groups is analysed it is evident that young men and young women are being particularly badly hit by falling employment rates: young women between 20 and 24 years saw their employment rate drop from 62.0 in 2008 to 57.0 in 2009 and to 53.1 in 2010. Young men aged 20 to 24 years saw their employment rate fall from 63.3 in 2008 to 48.3 in 2009 and 48.2 in 2010. The deep recession in the construction industry has had a particularly negative impact on men’s employment. During 2009, and continuing through 2010, for the first time the employment rate of young women is higher than that of young men. Effectively the gender gap in the younger age groups has been reversed over the past eighteen months as young men suffer the consequences of an economy with over-reliance on a construction industry that has effectively collapsed.
On the other side of the coin, a clear consequence of the severe economic recession in Ireland has been a dramatic rise in registered unemployment also particularly affecting young people. Latest unemployment data show Ireland at a rate of over 14.7% for March 2011 – an increase in 1% over the final quarter of 2010 compared to the third quarter. Employment in construction has continued to fall and figures from the QNHS estimates that one in seven of all jobs have been lost over the three year period since the peak employment level in late 2007 (CSO 2011). An OECD Report also published in March 2011 showed Ireland’s unemployment rate at the second highest (after Spain) among 34 economies (OECD 2011). EU comparative data shows Ireland at a 21% rate of youth unemployment – a rate that has doubled over the last ten years from 10% - and significantly above the EU average of 18% (Eurostat 2010). While unemployment rates are high among both young women and young men, they are particularly high among young men. One of the main reasons for this has been the crash in the construction industry which had been a major employer of male labour. Young men who often left school early in the height of the ‘boom’ to take up job opportunities in construction now find themselves unemployed and, for a significant proportion without even basic second level qualifications.

Ireland during the period of the ‘celtic tiger’ was a country of high levels of net in-migration, a new historical experience. The last two years has seen a reverse of this trend and a return to the historical pattern of emigration. Emigration levels have increased from an annual level of 36,000 in 2006 to a level of 65,000 in 2009, levelling out at 65,300 in 2010. The composition of emigrants has changed – Irish nationals now make up 42% (27,700) – the largest group. (In the year to 2009, it is estimated that the numbers emigrating from Ireland have increased by 40% - these included 28% Irish nationals and just over 50% were of other EU12 nationalities.) Latest data shows that emigration levels were significantly lower among women (24,900) than among men (40,400) in 2010. Just over 90% of emigrants in 2010 were under 44 years of age, around 45% of those emigrating are under 25 years of age and, as can be seen from the Chart 2, their numbers have increased sharply as the economic crisis has deepened. 2010 also saw a sharp decrease in immigration, falling from 57,300 in 2009 to 30,800 in 2010. Immigration levels are almost the same for 2010 between women and men at just over 15,000 each, the largest share are of Irish nationality. Net outward migration stood at 34,500 in April 2010 (compared to 7,800 in 2009) – this is the highest level of net outward migration since 1989. It is also interesting to note that although the numbers have fallen, there continues to be a significant number migrating into Ireland (57,000 in 2009 and 30,800 in 2010) resulting in a growing level of net migration from -7,800 in 2009 to -34,500 in 2010.) (CSO: Population and Migration Estimates September 2010). Forecasts for emigration levels during 2011 and 2012 estimate that around 50,000 (mainly young people) will emigrate each year. (ESRI 2011)

A.3 The main obstacles to the achievement of gender equality on the labour market

The central issue in relation to gender equality in employment remains the lack of a proper care infrastructure, particularly the lack of adequate child and pre-school education services and the perpetuation of financial disincentives within a household-based welfare and taxation system. Ireland does not have a comprehensive childcare policy. In this context, employment trends continue to show a steep decline in women’s labour force participation over the life cycle, particularly dependent on factors such as the number and age of their children. Gender differences are very marked in that men’s employment rates are largely unaffected by the presence of children in the household.
Gender patterns within the Irish labour market are marked, reflected in a high level of segregation on a sectoral and occupational basis. The principal economic sectors where women are located are the public sector (health, education and administration), retail, business and hotels and restaurants. Key sectors for men are construction, public administration, retail, business, agriculture and land transport. The particularly high concentration of male employment in construction has been evident in its vulnerability to recent changing economic conditions, particularly in the contraction of the over-valued property market in Ireland, a sharp downturn in construction activity and a rise in unemployment. Looking across the economy two-thirds of Irish women and half of all men in paid employment are each concentrated in six key sectors – three of these are common sectors playing a central role for both women and men - public administration, retail trade and business services.

New patterns are also evident in rates of employment and non-employment, particularly among women, within the Irish economy as a whole. While rates of recorded unemployment are similar between women and men, non-employment rates or 'inactivity' rates are significantly higher among women than among men reflecting women's traditional roles as primary carers, a role which continues to shape women's attachment to the labour market. Trends in the gender pay gap highlighted in recent studies show the significant level of the gap in Ireland (including among recent third level graduates), the impact of horizontal, and particularly vertical segregation and the need for equality and audit action plans at sectoral level together with improved statistical and monitoring systems. The importance of policies to support women's paid employment during childrearing years, such as childcare, family friendly and flexible workplace policies has been emphasised by the Consultative Group established by government to analyse and suggest ways to address the gender pay gap. (Consultative Group on Male/Female Wage Differentials 2002, Indecon, 2004) The services sector is critical for women in paid employment in two ways. In the first place, while women in public sector service employment constitute a large majority of those in low paid jobs, it is also a sector that has provided women with opportunities for better quality, secure employment opportunities and with significant possible access to flexible working arrangements. In the second place, women’s employment in private services comprises a range of different employment opportunities, from middle-level professional jobs to low paid, casual, part-time and vulnerable jobs.

Women also have different experiences of unemployment to men. As women are more likely than men to be in low-paid work and casual work, they therefore face a greater risk of immediate poverty as they become unemployed. Unemployed women are also less likely than men to qualify for Jobseekers Allowance - which exacerbates their financial difficulties. In part, this relates to the structure of the benefit system itself with its eligibility criteria linked to availability for full-time work. More households depend solely or primarily on a woman's wage today. A quarter of households with children are headed by lone parents, 90 per cent of whom are women. And new restrictions on eligibility for One Parent Family Payment will likely have a negative impact on many women-headed households.

Women also face particular barriers in the search for new job opportunities. Women with childcare responsibilities may have chosen particular part-time or flexible employment opportunities as a means to balance paid and unpaid work. This places restrictions upon their job search as only certain employment opportunities will be suitable, and may be contingent upon the accessibility of affordable childcare. It is more important than ever that employers increase access to flexible working.
There is evidence that the economic crisis has seen women in paid employment coming under increasing pressure not to avail of their full maternity leave entitlements. For example, complaints to the Equality Authority (EA) over the last year have shown a significant increase in complaints by women during pregnancy that they are experiencing discrimination. Discrimination continues to affect women striving to retain employment or seeking to move back into work – both women who are pregnant and those who already have caring responsibilities. Almost half of all queries to the authority last year related to concerns over maternity leave. More than 8,000 people last year contacted the EA for advice in relation to employment issues – more than 3,600 related to the Maternity Protection Acts - 1,100 related to the Parental Leave Acts - just over 60 related to the Adoptive Leave Acts. While the majority of people contacting the authority were seeking information, more than 1,000 said they had suffered or were concerned about discrimination.

Public policy continues to provide little support in Ireland to women and men aiming to combine paid employment, education and training together with caring responsibilities. Leave entitlements are limited, there are no specific entitlements for educational leave and financial supports are inadequate. In Ireland there is no legislative right for parents to work part-time, as is the case in many EU countries (Gornick and Meyers, 2003) and, as a result, only those who declare they are available to work full-time can register as unemployed. This situation seriously disadvantages many women, in particular those on low incomes, in relation to employment, education and training. Reconciling work and family is low on the social and political agenda in Ireland and the response from the system is slow and weak. Government, employer's organisations, trade unions and others all express support for work-life balance initiatives but there is little evidence that the necessary resources are being put in place to achieve a greater level of access to education and training (Barry and Vasquez del Aguila 2009).

Key gender specific areas of policy have also been severely cut-back during the recession period. The National Women’s Strategy (NWS), and the Equality for Women Measure (EWM), of which it is a part, has provided funding for a range of different projects in relation to women’s participation on the labour market and to their representation in the policy-making and public representation system. Funding for this programme has been reduced by 46%, from €10m to €5.4m. The €10m provided from the European Social Fund for equality measures has been allocated to the Dept of Enterprise, Trade and Employment with no commitment that these monies will be used for measures to support women on the labour market. The Gender Equality Unit (GEU) that had been established within the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (D/JELR) in 2000 and which carried a cross-departmental responsibility for gender mainstreaming has been dismantled. At present gender mainstreaming is only specifically addressed by a section within the much slimmed-down Equality Authority.

The departmental responsibility for equality had been shifted across from its former strategically important place within D/JELF to the more marginal ministry of Dept of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs (D/CEGA). Following the recent general election in early March 2011 responsibility for equality is now to be shared between the Department of Justice and Defence and the Department of Health. It is not yet clear how this reorganization will impact on the key responsibility for gender equality. It appears that the Department of Social Protection through its Social Inclusion Division (SID) will continue to be responsible for the co-ordination of the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2007-2013. In practice, resources allocated to gender equality generally, and to
gender mainstreaming, have been reduced substantially over the last two years in the context of the economic crisis, and it is evident that, even in a time of reduced public expenditure, the scale of cut-back experienced by key elements of the equality infrastructure has been disproportionate.

Evidence has repeatedly shown that women make up the majority of those living in poverty in Ireland, accounted for by the large numbers of lone parents (predominantly women) and elderly persons (mainly women) who experience poverty. Poverty levels are high among specific minorities, for example Traveller Community, and as has been shown over recent years there has been a growth in poverty levels among what have been called the ‘working poor’ – those on low paid employment Reduced levels of expenditure on community development programmes, childcare provision in disadvantaged communities and other locally based activities is having particularly negative impacts on women who are disproportionately involved at local and community levels (Social Justice Ireland 2010; NWCI 2010; INOU 2010; EAPN 2010).

In its comments on these cut-backs contained in their Submission to Budget 2010, the National Women’s Council of Ireland stated:

“"In this period of economic downturn the provision of supports to women to access employment opportunities is needed more than ever. The barriers which women face in accessing employment (including discrimination, lack of choice due to lack of childcare and inflexible working conditions) make the prospect of this recession and the reality of poverty which many women face all the more immediate.” National Women’s Council 2010).

A.4 Interesting examples of gender equality policy at national level

There have been no policies introduced over 2010-11 which have been planned with an explicit goal to promote gender equality. Little has been said over the last year in Ireland about the gender aspects of the economic and employment policies that have been pursued during this period of economic crisis. In practice, the focus on public sector pay and public expenditure has had specific consequences that can be considered from a gender perspective. For example, women make up a significant majority of public sector workers and are particularly crowded into the middle and lower job levels, including the poorer paid occupations within the public sector. The lack of protection towards lower paid and vulnerable workers within the public sector reveals a hidden and unrecognised gender bias.

a) National Women’s Strategy

The National Women's Strategy published in 2007 remains the representation of stated government policy on gender equality. As part of this strategy, women's employment, training and education are to be addressed as well as issues of care supports and leave entitlements. The Strategy details a series of eight objectives to inform public policy covering women’s participation in paid employment, decreasing the gender pay gap, supporting women entrepreneurs, access by women and girls across the training and educational systems, reducing poverty among women and enhancing the work-life balance. For example, Objectives 5a and 5b under the Strategy focuses on childcare, the issue which has been highlighted in the European Commission response to Ireland’s National Reform Programme.
The Strategy promises “a. to ensure that childcare services are optimised to meet the needs of parents and children alike….b. to ensure that the care infrastructure supports women’s socio-economic engagement.”

Specific policies are identified for the achievement of this objective including:

- focus on poverty and disadvantage in the implementation of childcare programmes
- monitor increasing female labour market participation
- ensure payments and supports to carers are efficient and effective
- further develop Carer’s Allowance and Benefit, subject to resources
- develop a structured consultation process

However, to a large extent the policy objectives laid out in the National Women’s Strategy are aspirational and lack specific commitments of resources or details of a timeframe for their implementation and attainment.

b) A significant positive development over recent years has been an increase in maternity leave entitlement to 26 months paid leave and 16 weeks unpaid leave, a policy likely to result in increased levels of employment among women in the 25-40 age sector. However, parental leave remains unpaid and there is no entitlement to paternity leave a position which reinforces gender inequalities, particularly in relation to care responsibilities.

A5 Interesting Examples of Employment Policies Supporting Gender Equality

Irish macro-economic policy over the last year has been dominated by just one objective i.e. stabilising public finances. Through the imposition of a pension levy of around 10% on public sector employees, the introduction of a Universal Social Charge, as well as a series of cutback in entitlements and in service provision, the government has attempted to reduce the budget deficit and regain control over a public financial system undermined by the dramatic reduction in taxation revenue coupled with the massive drain on resources by the process of recapitalisation of the failed banking sector. There have been negative consequences from a gender, equality and social inclusion perspective to many of these policies. Progressive social and economic policies, including gender equality policies and practices, have suffered as resources continue to be severely cutback. Reducing public sector pay has been a particular focus of macroeconomic policy and Budgets 2010 and 2011 brought in severe pay and pension cuts even for those in low paid public sector jobs.

Public Service salaries were reduced as follows:-

- 5% on the first €30,000 of salary
- 7.5% on the next €40,000 of salary
- 10% on the next €55,000 of salary
Overall, these measures were intended to generate public expenditure cuts with the objective of reducing the public deficit by €6 billion. Alongside these direct pay cuts a series of new measures were introduced in 2010 to change public sector pension entitlements and reduce pension expenditure into the future. These changes have involved creating a new single scheme for all entrants to the public service from 2010 with the following elements:

- raising the minimum public service pension age to 66 years (from 65 years)
- setting a maximum retirement age of 70 years (from 65 years)
- pensions to be based on “career average” earnings rather than final salary as currently applies.

Budget 2011 followed a similar path to Budget 2010 bringing in harsher measures to reduce the public deficit targeting increases in tax and social charges and lowering of welfare payments.

a) Universal Social Charge

The most significant change affecting those on middle and lower incomes – predominantly women - who were badly hit by the introduction of a new Universal Social Charge (to replace previous Health and Income levies) and to be paid on everyone’s gross incomes. This charge which came into effect in January 2011 is paid as follows:

- 0% on those with incomes below €4,004
- 2% on those with income from €4,005 to €10,036
- 4% on those on incomes €10,037 to €16,016
- 7% on those on incomes above €16,016

b) Statutory Minimum Wage

Reduction of Statutory Minimum Wage from €8.65 to €7.65 to take effect from January 2011. There is currently a strong possibility that this policy change will be reversed as it was a commitment made by both parties (Fine Gael and Labour) who make up the incoming government as of March 2011. The commitment has since been implemented in April 2011.

c) Reduction of welfare payment rates

Welfare policy measures introduced over the last two years have focused on those who are long-term unemployed and lone parents on welfare. A strict regime that makes welfare payments contingent on the take-up of training or employment opportunities is gradually being implemented across the welfare system in Ireland. Young people on job seekers allowances were hit badly. However, in the context of current pressures on access to training and employment programmes, the stated need for such a policy change is questionable. And there are particular implications for women due to their childrearing responsibilities. A recent report by the OECD showed that households with young children in Ireland pay on average 41% of their income on childcare (OECD 2010). In practice, unless the availability and the cost of childcare are addressed then these policy changes will
have a negative impact on women’s income (particularly in low income households) and do nothing to increase their participation in paid employment.

Details of 2011 cutbacks are as follows:

- Reduction in child benefit by €10.00 per month (additional increase for 3rd child)
- Carer’s Allowance to be reduced by €8.00 per week for carers under 66 years of age
- Increase in €2.00 per week contribution for those on rent supplement
- Reduction of €8.00 per week for those on Jobseekers Benefit
- Reduction of Supplementary Allowance for those aged 22-24 from €186 to €144 per week
- Employee and personal tax credits reduced by €180 per year
- Single person to pay tax at €32,800 rather than €36,400

d) Institutional Changes

An important recent development has taken place in the institutional framework for employment rights and low pay - the establishment of a new National Employment Rights Agency (NERA) as well as a promotional campaign focusing on employment rights. NERA has specific responsibility for ensuring the enforcement of the NMW (together with other employment rights) and with gathering data and commissioning research in relation to compliance with labour law and labour standards. One agency that survived the cutbacks has been the recently established National Employment Rights Agency (NERA) whose remit is investigate and monitor the implementation of employment rights legislation. With 80 inspectors and a budget of €10.8m in 2008, NERA responded to 1,516 complaints and identified 4,629 breaches of employment law. The work of NERA is important to those on low pay in particular including predominantly women, young people and migrant workers. The number of Labour Inspectors has been increased and new harsher penalties for non-compliance are to be set down.

This development is as a result of recent controversies concerning illegal and discriminatory practices towards migrant construction workers and the displacement of higher paid workers with lower paid migrant workers. Promises have been made to amend legislation to 'prevent the replacement of workers via collective redundancy' and to ensure that public capital projects will require certification of compliance with labour standards. There is no evidence of a specific gender perspective informing this development but potentially equal pay and anti-discrimination provisions will be covered under compliance with labour standards. A further important commitment under Towards 2016 which has been implemented is to the development of a new Code of Practice for those engaged in domestic service – the majority of whom are women migrant workers. While this is a voluntary code, it does serve as a benchmark for those engaged in this vulnerable area of employment.

A number of earlier key developments at institutional level have had a significant negative impact on infrastructure to monitor the implementation of equality legislation and developments in equality policy and human rights in Ireland.
Following a major cut-back of 43% in the budget to the Equality Authority in 2009, which carries national responsibility for these areas, the strength of equality related infrastructure has been very substantially weakened. At the same time the budget to the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) was substantially reduced, the Combat Poverty Agency was dissolved into a government department, Women’s Heath Council, Crisis Pregnancy Agency lost their independent status and the National Council to Combat Racism and promote Interculturalism (NCCRI) was disbanded.
PART B

B1 Structure, themes and gender mainstreaming of the whole NRP report

The Irish National Reform Programme (INRP) was released in May 2011 following a general election in March and the publication of a Programme for Government by the new Fine Gael (Christian Democratic) and Labour (Social Democratic) Coalition. The debate was marked by anger towards the previous government (which lost heavily) and to the terms of the IMF-ECB-EU loans and intervention in the Irish economy. The level of current and future indebtedness of the Irish economy has dominated debate in Ireland over the first six months of 2011 and much of the previous year. As a consequence there has been little to no emphasis on policy options other than those aimed at reducing the public deficit and the public debt. The INRP reflects this economic situation. Neither gender equality nor equality of opportunity are mentioned anywhere in the document in contrast to employment action plans in the past. Gender equality policy has clearly become a victim of the recession and crisis management of the Irish economy.

Forecasts for GDP growth of 0.8% in 2011 and 2.5% in 2012 are made in the document although these have already been bypassed by events which have lead to a series of forecasts from economic commentators that the Irish economy will contract in 2011 and again in 2012. The level of indebtedness is forecast for 111% of GDP for 2011 and to peak at 118% in 2013 returning to a level of 111% in 2015. A government deficit of -10% is assumed for 2011 and -8.6% for 2012. Because of these economic projections and the enormous amount of money to be taken out of the economy over the next three years, many of the policies presented in the INRP are in fact not projected to be in place until 2013, 2015 or even 2020. In this sense, this document is not a summary of policy initiatives for 2011-2012 but to a significant extent is an aspirational document dependant on achieving a specific set of results in the short-term.

The stated focus of the INRP, set out in its macro-economic scenario, is to:

a) reduce the budget deficit
b) outline a Jobs Initiative
c) detail a National Pension Framework

However, details of the Jobs Initiative have been held for a future date in May and have not been included in the INRP. This Jobs Initiative is stated as focusing on training, education and employment places for the unemployed with the aim of reducing the level of long-term unemployment. Because the Jobs Initiative is not launched in the INRP, but rather promised during the month of May 2011, no specific details of the value of policy measures, nor the numbers to be included under specific initiatives, are included. While there are references to ‘women returners’ in a couple of places within the document there are no policy initiatives described for those other than the registered unemployed. In relation to the pension framework details are presented of changes to pension entitlements (see below) but there is no mention of the gender issues which have been recognised and identified in relation in policy discussion over the last two decades in Ireland. The government did not use the opportunity of a focus on pensions to even acknowledge the gender inequality which has long been accepted by policy makers.

Five specific targets are addressed under the INRP of which employment, education and poverty are of particular relevance from a gender equality standpoint (specified targets : a)
employment b) education c) research & development d) climate change e) poverty). These form the main chapters of the report, together with macroeconomic chapters and a chapter on ‘horizontal and methodological issues’. The absence of gender as a framework for policy-making or even to inform the policy process is stark in the INRP and is an indication of the extent to which equality, anti-discrimination and gender issues have been, and are likely to continue to be, completely marginalised within the crisis management approach to the economy of this and the previous government.

B2 The employment strategy and the adequacy of the approach in the field of gender equality in employment

In the context of the severe economic crisis in the Irish economy, the INRP states that it is not in a position the take up the EU Headline Target (7s% employment rate of women and men) and instead sets the target of raising to 69% - 71% the employment rate for women and men aged 20-64 ‘including the greater participation of young people, older workers and low-skilled workers, and the better integration of legal migrants’. There is no gender analysis informing this statement and no differentiation in the setting of targets between women and men, despite the articulation of gender specific targets in earlier policy documents (linked to the EU Lisbon targets). The employment rate of women in Ireland has already fallen to 56% (below the Lisbon target of 60% which it had reached in 2007) while that of men has also fallen to 65% (from a peak of 76% which it had reached in 2004). This almost ten point differential between women’s and men’s employment rates is the result of historical disadvantage and cultural differences and it is crucial that it is understood and informs the policy process. Otherwise policy development initiatives will not be implemented on a gender equality basis. To raise women’s employment rate to 69 - 71% by 2020 would require the attainment of around a fifteen percentage point increase. There is no evidence of the gender specific policy measures required to support this aim.

B.2.1 An overview of the national employment strategy from a gender perspective

While gender equality is not mentioned anywhere in the INRP there are a few specific mentions of women in the document – these mainly occur under the ‘employment target’ chapter. The key aim of employment policy articulated in this section of the INRP is to minimise the drift towards long-term unemployment among people with low skills, those who have been registered as unemployed for over one year, those who are under 35 years and those that have been specifically hit by restructuring. While those with low skills and those under 35 years would encompass both women and men equally, that is not the case among those registered unemployed for more than one year and those hit by restructuring. Those hit by restructuring is referring to the collapse of the construction industry (linked to the over-inflated boom in commercial and residential property and the severe reduction in the public investment programme) – a sector that has been overwhelmingly male. There is no question that this sector of male unemployment is accounting for a large proportion of short and long-term male unemployment and requires a specific policy focus. However, while there appears to be some acknowledgement of the importance of women to the recent expansion of the Irish labour force, there is no attempt to create a balance of policies reflecting a commitment to gender equality.

This is despite the statement in the INRP that;
“Decisions on employment/labour market programmes will take cognisance of their impact on both men and women and the need to encourage the participation of specific groups who are currently outside the labour market to achieve long term economic growth. This includes women and older persons, two groups whose re-entry into the workforce contributed to the expansion of the labour force and tax base in the late 1990s and during the period of growth in the 2000s.” (INRP 2011)

Long-term unemployment is a huge and growing problem in the Irish economy (accounting for over 51% of the registered unemployed) and those who are registered as long-term unemployed are predominantly men accounted for to a significant degree by the collapse of the construction sector. Many women who are unemployed over an extended period of time tend to slip into definitions of ‘engaged on home duties’. Many other women cannot meet the conditions of eligibility for registration namely that an individual must be available and seeking full-time employment. Registration as ‘seeking part-time employment’ is not permitted under the Irish system which has a negative impact on many women who make up the large proportion of those who work part-time.

There is a strong statement in the INRP that the challenge of employment policy is

“targeting cost-effective activation programmes to those most at risk of losing contact with the labour market and drifting into long-term unemployment, and of increasing labour market participation of those cohorts with lower than average participation rates, including lone parents and people on illness/disability payments and to reintegrate into the labour market the group of women who have interrupted their careers for child rearing” (INRP 2011).

What is lacking in the INRP is any indication that this statement is being translated into specific policies. This statement could be interpreted as reflecting an understanding of the different economic positions of women and men in Irish society and an intention to bring that understanding to bear in the formulation of policy. However, in practice there appears to be an absence of policy measures aimed at women who have interrupted their careers for child-rearing and few social supports (particularly childcare) for lone parents, over 90% of whom are women, to enter the paid labour force. In fact community based childcare services have been reduced, the early childhood supplement has been abolished, and the commitment to a year of pre-school education to all 3 to 4 year olds has been spread over two years rather than one. This latter change undermines the ability of lone parents to take advantage of that promised year of a free pre-school place to strengthen their attachment to the labour market.

B.2.2 Gender mainstreaming and gender impact assessment of employment policies

Guideline 7 Increasing labour market participation of women and men, reducing structural unemployment and promoting job quality

There are a number of policy perspectives linked together in the INRP with the stated objective of increasing labour market participation. As indicated above, policy is focused on the long-term registered unemployed, those with low skills aged under 35 years and hit by structural change. There is also a stated intention (under Guideline 7.1) to integrate “all work benefit and support services” and to “improve targeting of resources applied to work placement, training and education for the unemployed” under a newly titled National Employment and Entitlements Service (NEES) (INRP 2011). One institutional change which
has taken place is that responsibility for the Community Employment Scheme (CE) – the largest active labour market scheme – has been transferred to the Department of Social Protection (D/SP) from January 2011. It remains to be seen if this will bring changes to the nature of that important scheme.

The Programme discusses the range of training and education measures that are currently, or will be, in place over the coming period. Because the Jobs Initiative has yet to be announced (promised May 2011) there is no clear indication which of these are additional places and which are already in the system.

The Report states that there are in 2011

276,000 training and further education places which include:

- 90,000 FAS training places
- 8,000 Skillsnet (enterprise initiative) places
- 10,500 Labour Market Activation Fund
- 168,000 Further Education (via Vocational Educational Committee) places (£20 million).

One clearly identified additional policy measure (Guideline 7.2) appears to be:

- TUS Community Work Placement Scheme which it states will aim to provide up to 5,000 additional places in the community and voluntary sector for the unemployed. This will, however, only partially reverse the loss of over 10,000 places in this sector over recent years.

The most important policy change (Guideline 7.3) from the perspective of gender equality is the new policy measure aimed at lone parents – the vast majority of whom are women. New policies towards lone parents have been under discussion for a considerable time (Barry 2010, 2009). Under this new policy entitlement to the One Parent Family Payment will cease when the youngest child reaches 14 years. Contact will be made with lone parents when the youngest child reaches 11 years with the stated aim of providing training, education and employment opportunities. Research has consistently shown that many lone parents wish access paid employment but the lack of childcare supports acts as a barrier. For this policy to have a positive gender equality impact the social infrastructure – particularly quality childcare services – need to be in place.

Guideline 8: Developing a skilled workforce responding to labour market needs and promoting lifelong learning

A new €20 million multi-annual higher education labour market fund to “enable unemployed people access innovative part-time higher education opportunities from certificate to postgraduate levels” has also been announced in the INRP. An initial ‘call for proposals’ was issued in April 2011 to the value of €5 million under what is called the Springboard Fund and described as for those who are unemployed with 5th and 6th level qualifications (Guideline 8.1). Its stated target is those with “a history of employment in construction or other sectors of the economy that are unlikely to recover to pre-recession levels”. The report also states that 1800 part-time undergraduate and postgraduate places within the ‘smart economy’ have been supported since 2009. Support for part-time higher education opportunities is to be
welcomed but it would be against the principle of gender equality if the only public support for part-time higher education opportunities were to be restricted to those unemployed from construction. There is a need for subsidised part-time higher education opportunities across the board in Ireland – when third levels fees were removed they were not removed from part-time courses – an option that may be the only one for many women.

Guideline 9: Improving the quality and performance of education and training systems at all levels and increasing participation in tertiary or equivalent education

In relation to education, there are specific targets set out in the INRP but these are long-term targets and are primarily aspirational (Guideline 9.1):

- Proportion of 20-24 year olds with upper second level qualifications (levels 4 and 5) to be increased from 86% to 94% by 2020
- Progression rate to tertiary education (levels 6 - 10) to be increased from 55% to 72% by 2020
- 48% of labour force aged 25 – 64 years to have tertiary level attainment (levels 6 – 10) by 2020

Other policies discussed in the INRP are towards early school leavers and cover literacy and numeracy supports, home/school/community liaison services and pupil-teacher ratios. While all of these areas of policy are important in relation to lowering Ireland’s above EU average early school leaving rate and achieving increased participation in both second and third level education, there are no specific policy measures contained in the programme, there is no specific gender informed policy or gender impact analysis. In practice, cut-backs are negatively affecting the school system, for example through the serious reduction in Special Needs Assistants, Classroom Assistants and language supports.

Guideline 10: Promoting social inclusion and combating poverty

A target to reduce ‘consistent poverty’ to between 2 – 4% by 2012 and to eliminate ‘consistent poverty’ by 2016 and thereby lifting 186,000 people out of a ‘risk of poverty and exclusion’ position is stated in the INRP. An interim target to lift between 9,000 and 97,000 out of the ‘at risk’ category by 2012 is also set down (Guideline 10.1) This measure of ‘consistent poverty’ used by government in Ireland showed that 4.2% of the population lived in ‘consistent poverty in 2008 and 5.5% in 2009. There is no indication in the INRP how a decrease in ‘consistent poverty’ or of those ‘at risk of poverty and exclusion’ is going to be achieved. There is a commitment to review national anti-poverty targets so that they are ‘appropriate and achievable’ by November 2011. However, without specific policy measures put in place, and given the level of crisis in the economy, it is highly unlikely that these stated targets are going to be reached. Given that women and children make up the majority of those living in poverty, this can only be viewed as negative from a gender equality perspective.

Rates of poverty for vulnerable groups over the lifecycle are presented in a table in the INRP. Lone parent families are shown to have the highest rate of consistent poverty (17.8%), followed by households in social rented housing (16.4%) jobless households and people not at work through disability or illness (13.2%) unemployed (9.7%) children 6.3%) and others. What is particularly unacceptable in the presentation of this table is that the data is not gender disaggregated. This reflects the situation across the report which displays a systematic gender blindness in its presentation of data as well as the detailing of policies.
An important policy change that has taken place and is covered in the INRP is the decision to reverse the cutback in the National Minimum Wage which had been implemented in January 2011 (Guideline 10.2). The cut had reduced the NMW from €8.60 to €7.60 and has now been reversed to its original level of €8.60. The NMW is important for from a gender equality perspective, for low paid workers, the majority of whom are women, young people and migrants. There is a stated intent in the INRP to review the workings of Joint Labour Committees (JLCs) which set rates of pay in specific sectors, for example in parts of the construction industry, in the hospitality sector including restaurants and in certain services such as hairdressing. These JLCs are critical in bringing together employer’s organisations, trade unions and government to set above NMW levels in predominantly low paid sectors. This review has yet to be set in place.

Another critical policy change has been announced in the INRP which changes the terms of eligibility to the State pension, the critical source of income for older people on low incomes, the large majority of whom are women (Guideline 10.3). According to the latest data from the D/SP 63% of those claiming the Non-contributory State Pension in 2009 were women (D/SP Statistical Report 2009). This change in eligibility involves the following:

Increase in age at which individuals qualify for the State Pension:

2014 from 65 to 66 years
2021 from 66 to 67 years
2028 from 67 to 68 years

There is no recognition in the INRP that women are by far the majority of those relying on State Pensions – no figures are included. There is no reference to the gender differences between women and men in relation to the State Pension. While women’s organisations, trade unions and others have been strongly campaigning to end the household-based pension system, to establish individualised pension entitlement for women and to end the system of institutionalised dependency there has been no reference to any of these issues, nor is there any proposal to create positive change of this kind, even up to 2028. This is a negative development from a gender equality perspective.

One of the policy measures highlighted in the INRP is introduction of a free pre-school year for children between the ages of 3 and 4. What is not detailed in the report is the fact that a year after its introduction the entitlement to a year has been changed from a one-year system to an entitlement spread over two years. This change will have a negative impact on those caring for young children, predominantly women, creating a fragmented entitlement unlikely to support mothers accessing paid employment.

B3 Gender Mainstreaming and the 2011 NRP

There is a complete failure of gender mainstreaming in the INRP 2011. Whereas policy areas discussed in specific sections of the report such as climate change and research and development have not traditionally taken a mainstreaming approach to gender in the Irish context, other sections such as employment, poverty and education would be expected to apply a gender mainstreaming approach. One highly significant policy change that has been introduced affecting significantly low and middle level earnings from employment has not been covered in the INRP: the Universal Social Charge (Guideline 11.1). Gender equality is
not mentioned or addressed within the INRP, not in its policy analysis framework nor in the detailing of the policy measures to be addressed. Data presented is not disaggregated by gender and there is no gender impact analysis presented in relation to policy. From a recent period in which equal opportunities and gender equality was specifically addressed in Irish Employment Action Plans, there has now been a lessening in commitment to gender equality within the policy process (Barry 2008, 2009). This can effectively be seen as a regressive tax on gross incomes with a negative impact on gender equality, and inequality generally, as it disproportionately impacts on those in low pay predominantly women, young people and migrants.
## SUMMARY GRID

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLICY INITIATIVE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>COMMENTS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>GL 7. Increasing labour market participation of women and men, reducing structural unemployment and promoting job quality</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7.1 Integration of benefits and services</strong></td>
<td>Integration of all work benefit and support services with the stated aim of improving targeting of resources applied to work placement, training and education for the unemployed under a newly titled National Employment and Entitlements Service (NEES). Community Employment Scheme moved to D/SP.</td>
<td>No gender mainstreaming or gender impact assessment of this initiative. There is no reason to expect a specific gender impact.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7.2 Community Work Placement Scheme</strong></td>
<td>TUS Community Work Placement Scheme with stated aim to provide up to 5,000 additional places in the community and voluntary sector for the unemployed. This will, however, only partially reverse the loss of over 10,000 places in this sector over recent years.</td>
<td>No gender mainstreaming or gender impact assessment. Community employment schemes have been particularly important for women in the past, particularly women lone parents and women in low income households so there is a possible positive gender impact.</td>
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<td><strong>7.3 Change of eligibility to OPFP.</strong></td>
<td>Under this new policy, entitlement to the One Parent Family Payment will cease when the youngest child reaches 14 years. Contact will be made with lone parents when the youngest child reaches 11 years with the stated aim of providing training, education and employment opportunities.</td>
<td>Research has consistently shown that many lone parents wish access paid employment but the lack of childcare supports acts as a barrier. For this policy to have a positive gender equality impact the social infrastructure – particularly quality childcare services – need to be in place.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>GL 8. Developing a skilled workforce responding to labour market needs and promoting lifelong learning</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>8.1 Higher education part-time opportunities</strong></td>
<td>A new €20 million multi-annual higher education labour market fund with the stated aim to ‘enable unemployed people access innovative part-time higher education opportunities from certificate to postgraduate levels. An initial ‘call for proposals’ was issued in April 2011 based on a small fund (value of €5 million) under what is called the Springboard Fund and described as for those who are unemployed with 5th and 6th level qualifications. Targeted sectors are construction and other sectors unlikely to recover to pre-recession levels.</td>
<td>Support for part-time higher education opportunities is to be welcomed but it would be against the principle of gender equality if the only public support for part-time higher education opportunities were to be restricted to those unemployed from construction. There is a need for subsidised part-time higher education opportunities across the board in Ireland – an option that may be the only one for many women.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>GL 9. Improving the quality and performance of education and training systems at all levels and increasing participation in tertiary or equivalent education</strong></td>
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<td><strong>9.1 Educational attainment targets</strong></td>
<td>Proportion of 20-24 year olds with upper second level qualifications (levels 4 and 5) to be increased from 86% to 94% by 2020. Progression rate to tertiary education (levels 6 - 10) to be increased from 55% to 72% by 2020. 48% of labour force aged 25 – 64 years to have tertiary level attainment (levels 6 – 10) by 2020.</td>
<td>These targets are important in relation to lowering Ireland’s above EU average early school leaving rate and achieving increased participation in both second and third education. However, there are no specific policy measures identified and there is no specific gender informed policy or gender impact analysis.</td>
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**GL 10. Promoting social inclusion and combating poverty**

| **10.1 Poverty reduction targets** | A target to reduce ‘consistent poverty’ to between 2 – 4% by 2012 and to eliminate ‘consistent poverty’ by 2016 and thereby lifting 186,000 people out of a ‘risk of poverty and exclusion’ position is set down. An interim target to lift between 9,000 and 97,000 out of the ‘at risk’ category by 2012 is also specified. | There is no indication how this decrease in ‘consistent poverty’ or of those ‘at risk of poverty and exclusion’ is going to be achieved. Without specific policy measures put in place, and given the level of crisis in the economy, it is highly unlikely that these stated targets are going to be reached. Given that women and children make up the majority of those living in poverty, this can only be viewed as negative from a gender equality perspective. |
| **10.2 Reversal of cut in NMW** | A decision has been taken and implemented to reverse the cutback in the National Minimum Wage which had been implemented in January 2011. The cut had reduced the NMW from €8.60 to €7.60 and has now been reversed to its original level of €8.60. | The NMW is important for from a gender equality perspective, for low paid workers, the majority of whom are women, young people and migrants. This is a positive development from a gender equality perspective. |
| **10.3 Change in eligibility to State pension** | The terms of eligibility to the State pension have been changed. This is the critical source of income for older people on low incomes, the large majority of whom are women. This change in eligibility involves the following:
  - Increase in age at which individuals qualify for the State Pension:
    - 2014 from 65 to 66 years
    - 2021 from 66 to 67 years
    - 2028 from 67 to 68 years | There is no recognition that women are by far the majority of those relying on State Pensions – no figures are included. In fact, according to the latest data from the D/SP 63% of those claiming the Non-contributory State Pension in 2009 were women (D/SP Statistical Report 2009). There is no reference to the gender differences between women and men in relation to the State Pension. While women’s organisations, trade unions and others have been strongly campaigning to end the household-based pension system, to establish individualised pension entitlement for women and to end the system of institutionalised dependency there has been no reference to any of these issues, nor is there any proposal to create positive change of this kind, even up to 2028. This is a negative development from a gender equality perspective. |
| **10.4 Change in free year of pre-school education for 3-4 year olds** | The introduction of a free pre-school year for children between the ages of 3 and 4 was introduced in 2009-10 is again highlighted in this Report. What is not detailed in the report is the fact that a year after its introduction the entitlement to a year has been changed from a one-year system to an entitlement spread over two years. | This change (spreading one year entitlement over two) will likely have a negative impact on those caring for young children, predominantly women. It creates a fragmented entitlement unlikely to support mothers accessing paid employment. |
Other relevant Policies (e.g. transversal or crisis orientated with impact on employment)

| 11.1 Universal Social Charge (USC) | The most significant change affecting those on middle and lower incomes – predominantly women - who were badly hit by the introduction of a new Universal Social Charge (to replace previous Health and Income levies) and to be paid on everyone’s gross incomes. This charge which came into effect in January 2011 is paid as follows:
- 0% on those with incomes below €4,004
- 2% on those with income from €4,005 to €10,036
- 4% on those on incomes €10,037 to €16,016
- 7% on those on incomes above €16,016 | The USC is effectively a tax on gross incomes with a strongly negative impact in reducing the incomes of middle and lower income earners. Those on low incomes are primarily women and the impact on gender equality and on inequality generally is likely to be negative. |
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