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A Gender Perspective on Ireland's Employment Policies

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Introduction

Recent employment growth in Ireland has been driven by a combination of a strong increase in women's employment as well as an increase in the employment of migrant workers. Women's economic position in Ireland has been transformed from a traditional low level of labour force participation to an EU average level, and rising. The increasing proportion of women in paid employment reflects changes in women's expectations, rising educational attainment levels, increased employment opportunities, smaller families as well as economic pressures in a high growth-high cost economy. As a result, this last decade has seen a dramatic change in the role of women on the Irish economy and their increasing attachment to paid employment. To a large extent, this has taken place in a context of economic growth and without dedicated employment policies focusing on women's labour market participation. The other key aspect of employment growth over recent years has been the growth in migrant labour - the Irish economy has become a major importer of labour. This is in contrast to its historical position as a country of large scale emigration and represents a dramatic change in the cultural, social and economic composition of Irish society. Recent data indicate that migrants now constitute 9% of the Irish population and show that new EU accession States, particularly Poland, account for the large majority of new migrants. New migrant workers are likely to continue to play a central role in employment growth within the Irish economy in the context of continuing employment growth albeit at a lower level - numbers in employment grew by 85,000 in 2006, forecasts for 2007 are at around half that level.

Despite a definite slowdown, strong economic growth continues to be a feature of the Irish economy placing Ireland's recent growth rates at nearly double the EU average. GDP growth for 2006 was 6.0% and forecast growth for 2007 ranges between 3% and 4% (Dept of Enterprise and Employment 2006, ESRI 2006, Central Bank 2006). Ireland's rate of employment has increased significantly from 65% in 2001 to 68% in 2006 – above the EU average of 64%.

Gendered Patterns of Employment Change

As well as the growth in the level of women's employment, its composition has also undergone significant change. Between 1999 and 2006 women's employment rate has increased from 53% to 59%.¹ The strongest growth in women's paid employment rate is taking place in the 35-44 age group (from 60% in 1999 to 65% in 2006) and particularly in the 45-54 age group (from 48% to 63% over the same time period) (CSO 2006). These figures reflect the way in which the pattern of increasing employment rates has been working its way through different generations of Irish women. The gap between the

¹ Women's employment rate is calculated among those aged 15-64 - the equivalent rate for men also increased from 75% to 78% (CSO 2006).

employment rate of younger and middle age groups of women has narrowed significantly and even in the older age group a similar pattern of change is emerging. Among Irish men, employment rates are generally stable, although there has been a lowering of the rate among younger men (linked to higher educational participation) and an increased rate of employment among older men. These changes have led to a narrowing of the gender gap in the employment rate between women and men (among those aged 15-64) from 21.5 in 2001 to 18.8 in 2004 and 18.4 in 2006, still wider than the EU average of 15.0 in 2006. Among the older age group 55-64 employment rates are rising although the gender gap in the employment rate is still wide. Both women and men in the 55-64 age group show increased employment rates with data showing that the rate of increase among older women is particularly high leading to a narrowing of the traditionally wide gender gap between older women and men's employment rates (see Table 1).

Table 1 Employment Rates by sex and age 1999; 2001; 2004; 2006

| Employment Rates (ILO) % | Age group | 1999 | 2001 | 2004 | 2006 |
|---------------------------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | | | | | |
| Females | <i>15-19</i> | 24.9 | 22.2 | 21.1 | 22.2 |
| | <i>20-24</i> | 67.4 | 65.6 | 66.8 | 66.2 |
| | <i>25-34</i> | 72.4 | 74.5 | 73.7 | 75.5 |
| | <i>35-44</i> | 59.6 | 62.8 | 63.6 | 64.7 |
| | <i>45-54</i> | 47.7 | 54.2 | 59.7 | 62.7 |
| | <i>55-59</i> | 33.0 | 36.3 | 43.3 | 46.7 |
| | <i>60-64</i> | 18.9 | 20.2 | 23.6 | 29.7 |
| Total Females | | 52.6 | 55.1 | 57.2 | 59.3 |
| | | | | | |
| Males | <i>15-19</i> | 30.8 | 29.1 | 24.9 | 28.5 |
| | <i>20-24</i> | 74.4 | 71.8 | 71.7 | 75.2 |
| | <i>25-34</i> | 89.9 | 89.4 | 88.5 | 88.8 |
| | <i>35-44</i> | 88.7 | 90.7 | 90.2 | 90.7 |
| | <i>45-54</i> | 84.1 | 84.9 | 85.6 | 85.8 |
| | <i>55-59</i> | 71.3 | 73.8 | 72.5 | 74.3 |
| | <i>60-64</i> | 51.4 | 54.4 | 55.7 | 57.9 |
| Total Males | | 75.2 | 76.1 | 76.0 | 77.7 |
| | | | | | |
| Total persons | | 63.9 | 65.6 | 66.7 | 68.6 |

Source: Central Statistics Office, Quarterly National Household Survey, 2005, 2006, 2007

New trends are evident in rates of employment and non-employment, particularly among women, within the Irish economy as a whole. Gender differences can clearly be seen when data on those outside paid employment in Ireland are analysed. While rates of recorded unemployment are similar between women and men, non-employment rates or so-called '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. A high gender gap in employment in Ireland compared to other EU countries is evident in Table 2 (due to this relatively high non-employment rate among Irish women) and although the gender gap has been reducing

over recent years, the gap between the Irish and EU level (which has also been reducing) has only slightly narrowed.

Table 2 Employment gender gap - EU harmonised data, 1999-2005

| | | Ireland | EU-15 | EU-25 |
|-----------------------|------|---------|-------|-------|
| Employment Gender Gap | 2000 | 22.4 | 18.7 | 17.6 |
| | 2001 | 21.7 | 18.1 | 17.0 |
| | 2002 | 20.0 | 17.2 | 16.3 |
| | 2003 | 19.5 | 16.7 | 15.8 |
| | 2004 | 19.4 | 15.9 | 15.2 |
| | 2005 | 18.6 | 15.5 | 15.0 |

Source : EGGsIE, 2006.

Key growth sectors are construction and services. Major infrastructure investment projects as well as housing account for the high level of construction activity while growth in health services employment, financial and business services as well as wholesale, retail and other services account for the continued expansion of the services sector. Decreases in employment are evident in agriculture, forestry, fishing, as well as in certain manufacturing industries. Women are strongly represented in employment growth in other services (largely personal services and frequently part-time), in health services, retail activity and also in financial and business services. (Dept of Enterprise and Employment 2005).

EU Employment Strategy - Lisbon Targets

The Lisbon/Stockholm targets for employment have already been achieved in Ireland for 2007 and 2010 targets are also likely to be reached. The Irish employment rate of 68% is above the 67% EU target for 2007 and on course to reach the EU target of 70% by 2010. Women's employment rate will need to increase from its current level of 58% to reach the EU target of 60% by 2010 and all the current indications are that this will occur. There is clearly potential for further employment growth among the middle and older age groups of women allowing Ireland to reach, and possibly bypass, the Lisbon/Stockholm targets. Ireland is predicted by the European Commission Employment in Europe Report 2005 to reach these Lisbon targets.

Gender Pay Gap

Trends in the gender pay gap in Ireland show considerable movement in both a widening of the gap at the end of the 1990s followed by a narrowing of the gap in the first half of 2000s. Estimates vary. Harmonised EU data (based on the Living in Ireland Survey) show that from a level of 19 percentage points in 1994, the gap increased to 22 points in 1999 narrowing again to 17 points in 2001, remaining at 17 points in 2004 (ESRI 2002, EGGSIE 2005). Results from Ireland's first National Employment Survey were published in 2006 (based on data for 2003) and allow for a more comprehensive picture of wage levels, earnings and income on a gender disaggregated basis. Prior to this, official national wage data was confined to the industrial sector leaving out the all-important services sector where three-quarters of women workers are currently employed. It will now become possible to develop a more detailed time series of employees earnings and the factors influencing women's and men's employment levels.

Data from this first Survey reveal a 16 percentage point gender pay gap in average hourly earnings with a narrower gap in the under 30 year age groups, among professional workers, managers and administrators and in the public sector - in fact women under 30 years in the public sector earned on average higher rates of pay than male workers. The widest gaps between women and men's earnings were evident in financial services and the education sector. Among hotel and restaurant workers where average hourly earnings are the lowest, the difference between women's and men's wages was the smallest. The importance of educational qualifications was confirmed with graduates earning twice as much as early school leavers although the persistence of the gender pay gap is evident even among recent graduates of whom women earn on average 10% less than men. It will also provide for a much more detailed profile of earnings within different sub-sectors, occupations and regions of the economy which will generate a clearer picture of the gender wage gap. It will however represent only the first step to creating a data time series allowing for a detailed analysis of trends in the gender pay gap over time (Central Statistics Office 2006)

Poverty and Low Pay

Poverty trends are particularly marked in Ireland, where high growth has been associated with increasing inequality. Women are the majority of those at risk of, and experiencing, poverty in Ireland. Two groups account for most of those who are at high risk of poverty - lone parents and persons living alone - and it is women who constitute over 90% of lone parents as well as over half of those living alone (53% according to Census 2002). Significant gender gaps are evident in the high poverty risk among women compared to men as well as the particularly high poverty risk among lone parents (the large majority of whom are women) at 48% in 2004. Small changes are evident between 2003 and 2004 but the pattern of high risk of poverty continues. Lone parents are the sector most vulnerable to poverty and they constitute significant numbers of women including around 80,000 who are dependent on social welfare. Data on poverty also indicate the vulnerability of specific sectors of the population, for example those categorised as 'ill or disabled' show very high rates of poverty risk, 47% in 2004.

Table 4: At-risk-of-poverty-rate (after social transfers, 60% threshold)

| | <i>2003</i> | | <i>2004</i> | | <i>Total</i> | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female | 2003 | 2004 |
| <i>Household Composition</i> | | | | | | |
| Lone parent | 51.4 | 48.1 | 46.8 | 49.1 | 49.3 | 48.3 |
| Person living alone | 40.3 | 40.5 | 36.7 | 34.9 | 40.4 | 35.7 |
| | | | | | | |
| <i>Age</i> | | | | | | |
| 0-14 | 20.3 | 21.7 | 19.5 | 23.1 | 21.0 | 21.2 |
| 15-64 | 17.4 | 17.8 | 16.4 | 18.8 | 17.6 | 17.6 |
| 65+ | 26.4 | 32.3 | 25.8 | 28.2 | 29.8 | 27.1 |
| | | | | | | |
| <i>Urban/Rural Location</i> | | | | | | |
| Urban | 18.2 | 19.5 | 15.0 | 18.1 | 18.9 | 16.6 |
| Rural | 20.0 | 22.0 | 22.8 | 25.5 | 21.0 | 24.1 |
| | | | | | | |
| <i>Ill/Disabled</i> | 58.2 | 41.6 | 52.9 | 38.2 | 51.7 | 47.3 |

(Source: EU-SILC, CSO: 2005)

Despite the high levels of growth attained by the Irish economy over recent years, low pay remains a significant problem. The 2003 review of the National Anti Poverty Strategy showed that the proportion of those in poverty headed by a person in the labour market had increased substantially from 6% in 1998 to 19% in 2001. This trend is confirmed by the most recent data on poverty which reveals that one in every five people at risk of poverty live in a household headed by a person with a job (EU-SILC 2006). Women are the majority of those on low pay and account for the majority of those at risk of, and experiencing, poverty. Policies addressing low pay have a positive effect on gender equality. Critically important from the standpoint of women who constitute the majority of those on low pay, has been the increase in the level of the National Minimum Wage (NMW) since its introduction in 2000 to its current level of EURO 8.65. Research indicates that women are likely to account for a significant majority of those who benefit from positive wage increases due to the NMW. A study of the likely impact of the NMW revealed that 7% of women compared to 4.5% of all private sector employees were at or below the full adult minimum rate. Among women working part-time the percentage was 16%. (Nolan 2002)

Table 5 : National Minimum Wage Levels 2000-2007

| | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| National Minimum Wage | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2007 |
|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|

| | | | | | | | |
|---------------|---------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Adult over 18 | IR£4.40 | IR£4.70 | €6.35 | €6.35 | €7.00 | €7.65 | €8.65 |
|---------------|---------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|

(Source: OASIS (Online Access to Services, Information and Support) www.oasis.gov.ie)

Around 8% of those on the NMW continue to pay income tax (a reduction from 10% as a result of changes introduced in 2004-06 Budgets). While recent NMW increases have been significant there continue to be huge issues concerning enforcement of the minimum wage and the under-resourcing of the Labour Inspectorate responsible for ensuring compliance with statutory wage levels and working conditions. Some recent improvements are detailed below. From a gender equality perspective, the predominantly household-based welfare system itself can act as a disincentive to women potential earners due to the household impact of all adult earnings and among those who move from welfare payments into low paid jobs their entitlement to secondary benefits, such as medical cards or rent subsidies, are critical. Very little progress has been made towards the individualisation of the social welfare system over the last few years.

Care Issue

The central issue in relation to women's access to employment is the lack of a proper care infrastructure. A Report from the OECD published in September 2004 strongly criticises Ireland's lack of early childhood education and care provision arguing for increased resources to improve provision. In addition, the Report argues for a system of paid parental leave of one year's duration – to replace the current system of unpaid leave over fourteen weeks. A further key recommendation is for a guaranteed publicly funded pre-primary place for all children and for full school days for all young children from disadvantaged areas (OECD 2004). Increasing the 'supply and affordability' of childcare facilities has been highlighted in both the EU Employment Taskforce and the EU Joint Employment Reports (2004) as a key recommendations to the Irish government. Ireland has a long way to go in the development of a comprehensive childcare system and existing measures, such as the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (mainly targeted at disadvantaged areas) while significant, remain limited in tackling the scale of what is in effect a *care crisis*.

National Women's Strategy

The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform published its long promised National Women's Strategy in 2007, linked to its commitments under the Beijing Platform for Action 1995, which summarises current government policy in areas such as education, health, employment. 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. Women's organisations and others argued the importance of this proposed strategy detailing resource allocation, specific targets and timesframes for the achievement of greater gender equality - in practice this has not happened.

An inter-departmental group chaired by the Dept of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and supported by a social partnership consultative group was set up to produce the National Women's Strategy (NWS). The NWS was stated as intending to 'provide a framework within which the outstanding gaps in the position of women in Irish society are addressed over a 10-year period'. Issues concerning the implementation of the strategy are key and there is the danger (which may prove very significant and potentially negative) that gender mainstreaming will from now on be seen as part of the NWS rather than part of wider economic and social policy e.g. the National Development Plan and National Agreements.

Recent Irish employment strategy statements, such as the National Reform Programme (NRP) submitted to EU in 2006, does reveal a lack of commitment to addressing gender equality and a pull-back from gender mainstreaming (Barry, Conlon & Murphy 2006). The emphasis across the NRP is on maintaining high growth levels through policies towards competitiveness and ensuring an adequate supply of labour, including skilled workers. Where the NRP refers specifically to women it focuses on women as a source of increased labour supply in a high growth economy and to increased childcare provision as its central policy approach. In relation to equality and inequality issues, the emphasis is on the role of the NMW in protecting those on low incomes and on taxation reform aimed at improving the situation of those on low pay. Migrant workers and older workers are also viewed as important sources of additional labour supply.

As noted above, there is a strong likelihood that Ireland will reach the Lisbon employment targets for women and for older people. In fact, it is likely that Irish women's employment rate will exceed the Lisbon target. The Barcelona childcare target, on the other hand, has not been adopted by Ireland and is not referred to in the NRP. Childcare expenditure under the EOCP is presented as the central gender equality initiative under the NRP and while investment in childcare has increased significantly, this has been from a very low base and the crisis in childcare provision continues.

The development of integrated guidelines in relation to the NRP at EU level, and the dropping of specific gender equality guidelines, has meant that Ireland has been able to submit a Report weak in its commitments to gender equality and GM. Without a specific EU gender guideline (or Equal Opportunities Pillar as in the past) the Irish NRP has been able to present itself as largely *gender neutral*, but can in fact be assessed as largely *gender blind*. The Irish NRP lacks an analysis of the specific situations of women and men in relation to the different guidelines, much of the data presented is not gender disaggregated, and policy initiatives are presented without references to their potential impact on women and men, or on different sectors of women and men.

While women's employment position is changing, women continue to be concentrated in persistent areas of poverty and low pay representing a subordinate economic position which can only be addressed by bringing a gender equality perspective across the policy spectrum. Policies to tackle structural gender inequalities require a combination of targeted positive action initiatives together with a mainstreaming approach ensuring the gender inequalities are addressed in each policy arena. Under the current policy system,

gender based employment goals are likely to be achieved in Ireland but gender equality goals are unlikely to be attained.

Equality Legislation and Policy

Ireland has a strong legal and administrative system in relation to equality. Equality legislation, adopted in 1998-2000 (and updated in 2004) protects against discrimination in employment, pay and access to services on nine specific grounds : gender, family status, age, sexual orientation, race, membership of the Traveller community, ethnic origin and disability. With the passing of this legislation a new Equality Authority was set up with responsibility for promoting and developing policies towards equality and an Equality Investigations Tribunal was established responsible for investigating reports of breaches of the legislation.

The 2005 Annual Report of the Equality Authority (which has specific responsibility for promoting and defending rights established under equality legislation) documents a 2% increase in queries under the legislation. The legislation covers nine grounds of discrimination (including race, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, family status, and disability). 32% of queries under the employment equality legislation concerned the ground of race in 2005, 19.5% concerned gender, 15% disability and 12.5% age. 10% of queries under the access to services legislation concerned gender. Information booklets on equality legislation were made available for the first time in a range of languages in 2005 including arabic, croatian, chinese, french, czech, portugese, spanish, russian and lithuanian.

New initiatives in 2005 saw the Authority working with the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Health to promote greater equality. Two schools were selected to develop a stronger focus on equality under the Whole School Evaluation process and equal status reviews were carried out in a hospital in west Dublin and in the North Western Health Board. In conjunction with the Equal Opportunities Framework Committee (with responsibility for promoting equality at the level of the enterprise) the Equality Authority supported equality reviews in 159 small and medium sized enterprises encompassing training, policy development and equality in customer service delivery. (Equality Authority 2005) New research on workplace equality policies revealed a lower level of stress and higher level of job satisfaction in companies with a formal workplace policy on equality (O' Connell and Russell 2005). A new development in statistical information on equality saw the publication of a special survey on equality by the Central Statistics Office in Autumn 2005. It revealed that 12.5% of the population stated that they had experienced discrimination over the previous two years (5.1% work related and 9% in relation to services access). 60% of those took no action in response to their experience.

Equality Infrastructure

Alongside the core institutional arrangements in relation to equality - the Equality Authority and the Equality Tribunal - there are a number of other elements of equality

infrastructure which have developed over recent years in Ireland. Equality proofing was first addressed at a central level in Ireland under the terms of national social partnership agreements in the late 1990s. Under a working group convened by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR), the principles of equality proofing were developed and a number of key projects were selected under 'Sustaining Progress' (the previous national agreement) for specific initiatives. These initiatives were developed and implemented by the Equality Authority and covered quality customer service in the public sector, strategic planning by the City and County Development Boards and the National Action Plan Against Racism. (Crowley and McGauran 2005)

Gender mainstreaming (GM) was adopted at national policy level in Ireland under the National Development Plan 2000-06, linked in part to the requirements of EU Structural Funds which funded 7% of EURO 51ml development programme. Gender Impact Assessment (GIA) guidelines were adopted in March 2000 as a key administrative system for the implementation of GM. Of the 177 measures funded through the NDP all but six were to come under the GM principle which was established as a horizontal principle across the Plan (not only those measures funded or part-funded by Structural Funds) covering health, housing, transport, industrial development, regional development, education, training, employment and social inclusion. Implementation of GM within the Plan was to be implemented through three key processes : completion of gender impact assessment forms in relation to each relevant measure; inclusion of gender equality in project selection criteria; commitments to monitor and evaluate progress on GM.

Two units to provide advice and support on GM were set up in 2000. The Gender Equality Unit established in the DJELR has had responsibility for monitoring commitments to GM and providing advice to policy makers, including in relation to data collection and analysis. Within the Department of Education and Science, the Education Equality Unit was set up with responsibility for GM within the educational system. An additional commitment in relation to GM involved representation from both the Equality Authority and the NDP Gender Equality Unit and a recommendation for gender balance on the monitoring committees for the GDP. None of the six monitoring committees achieved the 40% target, ranging from a low of 23% representation of women on the monitoring committee for the Operational Programme for the Border, Midland and Western Areas to a high of 38% on the Employment and Human Resources Operational Programme monitoring committee in 2002 (McGauran, 2005). Important additional initiatives have also been put in place by the Gender Equality Unit in relation to gender disaggregated data and also the development of training programmes, guidelines and resource materials for the implementation of GM in practice. In addition, a pilot project on gender budgeting at local development level has been funded (Barry and Pillinger 2005).

A recent analysis of GM in practice under the NDP established the following findings :

- Gender Impact Assessment forms were completed for 75% of specified measures and sub-measures under the NDP.

- 37% of measures and sub-measures include gender equality in their project selection criteria, 45% do not.
- 44% of all measures and sub-measures in the NDP committed to collecting at least one indicator that was gender disaggregated.
(McGauran 2005)

A more detailed analysis of the GIA forms completed for the twenty-two non-agricultural measures/sub-measures of the regional operational programmes revealed that while half of GIA's provided data in response to the first question on the form (i.e. current position of women and men in area which expenditure will address), only around one-quarter responded to the other two questions (i.e. factors leading to women and men being affected differently and how those factors can be addressed and changed).

"...an analysis of how the GIA forms were completed indicated that the completion was poor....It is worrying that the section of the form outlining commitments to change policy in order to promote gender equality was the section least likely to be completed."

(McGauran, 2005)

In their assessment of GM under the NDP, Crowley and McGauran argue for key principles necessary to inform effective GM within the policy system : anticipatory process, integral to policy making system, involving participation of Non-Governmental Organisations, clear enforcement mechanisms, investment and resourcing, a transparent and inclusive process, aimed at achieving substantial equality. They argue that GM needs to be linked with wider processes of equality proofing in Ireland. 'Ultimately a full integrated equality mainstreaming will have to emerge that embraces all nine grounds covered by the equality legislation.' (Crowley and McGauran, 2005) The mid-term review of the NDP carried out during 2003 highlighted weaknesses in the integration of horizontal principles - one of which is gender equality – across the NDP. Following on from this review certain measures under the NDP were selected for monitoring over the 2004-06 period in relation to gender equality. These include all education and training measures and selected regional and housing measures. Gender equality was specified as an objective under the NDP Operation Programme for Human Resource Development. A review and evaluation of the NDP and this programme are expected in 2007.

The adoption of GM as a horizontal principle of the NDP 2000-2006 had the effect of raising the visibility of gender within the policy making process in Ireland. Implementation of GM has been uneven and its impact on the assessment and reestablishment of policy priorities has been limited. As the NDP moved into its final phase, there were indications that GM has slipped down the policy agenda. References in the NRP 2006 to GM indicate that in the future it will be addressed under the National Women's Strategy. GM has been adopted as a horizontal principle under the NDP 2007-13 but is not one of the key *organising themes* under this new plan. There is also no indication at this point of a successor programme to the *Equality for Women Measure* which supported a range of significant projects on gender equality under the previous plan covering access to training, education and employment, occupational segregation, representation in decision-making and the gender pay gap.

The transition from one NDP to another has opened up a period of uncertainty in relation to policies towards gender mainstreaming and also the future of institutional mechanisms for gender mainstreaming, specifically the Gender Equality Units, Gender Impact Assessment Guidelines and gender equality representation on NDP monitoring committees. The Gender Equality Unit of the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform which was established under the NDP 2000-2006 has reached the end of its lifespan. At this stage there is no proposal as to how the role and the work of the Unit will be taken forward through the post 2007 period. The future of the gender mainstreaming policy adopted under the current plan is uncertain.

The requirements of the EU structural funds in relation to gender equality which part-funded the NDP played an important role in establishing gender mainstreaming as a principle in Irish economic policy. Given the importance of the EU policy framework in strengthening commitments towards, as well as initiatives in relation to gender equality in Ireland, the lack of a specific gender equality guideline in the current EU National Reform Programme is regrettable. Following the loss of the Equal Opportunities Pillar (present in earlier pre-2003 European Employment Strategy), this further loss of targeted gender equality guidelines is contributing to a weakening of the already limited gender perspective in employment policy in the Irish context. Given this situation, it is particularly important that the EU response to Ireland's National Reform Programme emphasises the need for a strengthened commitment to gender mainstreaming within the new development plan as well as a specific gender equality programme in relation to childcare, the gender pay gap, individualisation of social welfare, leave entitlements, women returners, women migrant workers and lone parents.

In overall terms, the development and articulation of the economic and social policy agenda in Ireland is mainly driven by negotiations over social partnership agreements. At the present time, in the context of a new national agreement, a new NDP and a post-election period, significant new initiatives, with particular relevance for gender equality, are more likely to emerge from the social partnership and budgetary processes rather than under the NDP or NRP processes. Very few new initiatives are detailed in the NRP and the policy framework within which it is located is itself being reviewed and redeveloped under both the new partnership agreement and new NDP process. The extent to which gender equality issues and GM are addressed within the Irish policy process will depend on whether they are focused on and resourced within these key processes. EU policy has played a significant role in the past, particularly in relation to Structural Fund Guidelines and also in its emphasis on gender equality within EU Employment Strategy. Any weakening of the EU focus on gender equality and gender mainstreaming will likely result in a corresponding weakness within Irish employment policy.

Ireland has developed a significant level of legislation, institutional mechanisms and policy processes in relation to GM over the last seven years. These developments were driven by both the Irish NDP 2000-06 and the 'Partnership 2000' and 'Sustaining Progress' 2000-05 social partnership agreements. In practice, however, there is evidence that the implementation of GM within the NDP has been weak, both under-resourced and lacking an effective system of monitoring and enforcement. The significance of women's

increasing employment rate is recognised within Irish employment policy but there is a lack of gender analysis underlying policy development and implementation. Employment policy (and social inclusion policy) in Ireland has adopted a largely *gender neutral* approach with few targeted initiatives and little gender-informed assessment and lacking a gender perspective and gender analysis. Gender disaggregated data is piecemeal and gender targeted initiatives are extremely limited. EU policy towards gender equality and GM has been significant in influencing Irish employment policy in the past. There is a danger that the fragile new infrastructure for GM in the Irish context is weakening and any lessening of focus at EU level will exacerbate this process.

Lone Parents and Employment Policy

Traditional high levels of non employment among women in Ireland have fallen significantly over recent years as increased numbers of women have accessed paid work, particularly among the middle age groups. Despite these changes women constitute the majority of those without an independent earned income or dependent on social welfare. Those living in poverty and dependant on social welfare in Ireland comprise largely those on State old age pensions, those registered as unemployed and those drawing One Parent Family Payments. Lone parents and older people, two of the groups most at risk of and experiencing poverty in Ireland, are predominantly women. Ireland's welfare system is predominantly a household-based system despite some changes towards a more individualised structure. Most welfare payments are paid to a main household claimant and include payments for qualified adult and child dependants. Claimants in traditional households are usually men. Women-headed households dependant on welfare are generally drawing One Parent Family Payments and old age pensions. For women in welfare dependent households access to active labour market programmes is restricted unless the woman is head of household or the primary claimant.

Recent Developments

Recent policy developments in Ireland in relation to unemployment and inactivity focus on the long-term unemployed, young unemployed and lone parents. The Community Employment Scheme (CE) is by far the most important active labour market programme in Ireland. The CE scheme is managed by FÁS, Ireland's training and employment authority, and its stated aim is to help people who are long-term unemployed and other disadvantaged people to get back to work by offering part-time and temporary placements in jobs based within local communities. CE schemes have played a critical role in the provision of community and care services (e.g. elder care, home helps, meals on wheels, childcare) without which there would be an increased unsupported care burdens on households and communities, primarily carried by women. This scheme, which primarily targeted long-term unemployed, has had the important gender-positive approach of allowing eligibility for lone parents and the spouses of the long-term unemployed. As a result the majority of participants on the Scheme have been women. Currently, there are over 20,000 participants on the scheme, about 57% of whom are women and nearly half of these are lone parents. Because it is locally based, it provides

childcare, it allows for retention of secondary benefits and as it is part-time it has proved to be an attractive option for lone parents (OPEN, 2004). The scheme also targets travellers, persons with disabilities and programme refugees (18 years or over, and who has been on the Live Register for any period of time).

An important positive initiative introduced in 2000 is the Back to Work Allowance (BTWA) Scheme which allows people to keep their social welfare payments on a tapered basis on taking up employment. The EU Employment Taskforce identified this as a progressive scheme in supporting the transition from welfare to paid employment. A similar scheme, the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) allows those in receipt of a social welfare payment to return and pursue a second or third level programme of education. Participants receive a standard rate of payment which is not means tested and are allowed to keep any secondary benefits already held.

The Family Income Supplement (FIS) was introduced in the mid 1990's to increase the reward from work by providing low paid households with additional income. FIS is only available to low income households with children. To qualify for a payment, the family must have a minimum of 19 hours paid employment a week – the hours of two partners can be added together to make up the required hours. The FIS received is 60% of the difference between net family income and the income limit, which applies to the family. There was a €7 per week increase in the minimum FIS payment, from €13 to €20 (the intention being to make the scheme more attractive to people at the lowest Family Income Supplement payment levels) and an increase by €28 in FIS weekly income thresholds, bringing the limits for a family with one child to €407 and €433 for a family with two children. These increases have been criticised for not keeping pace with increases in average earnings. It is a potentially important income and employment support, however the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA) has estimated that the take-up may be as low as 40% of those entitled. Another policy aimed at those entering low paid employment is the 'earnings disregard' relating to the One Parent Family Payment (OPFP). Claimants may have earnings up to a specific level and remain entitled to a reduced payment. The ceiling on the earnings disregard, and the lack of a policy of gradual withdrawal, means that in practice lone parents seeking employment tend to seek part-time and often low paid employment (OPEN 2004)

In the National Reform Programme 2006 (NRP) a new emphasis in labour market activation policy is evident. This is reflected in a shortening of the referral period (from 6 months to a target of 3 months) under which those who are unemployed are drawn into the Local Employment Service and other activation programmes. The widening of these referral programmes to include lone parents and those with disabilities is also specified. In relation to those on Disability Allowance a new system of tapered withdrawal was introduced for those entering employment or labour market programmes.

A recent Report on the situation of lone parents highlights that around 43% are estimated to be in employment and recognises that many of those are in part-time employment, due in part to the workings of the earnings disregard system which is set at a level that has the effect of restricting many lone parents to low-paid, part-time employment. The need for

incentives to lone parents to take up full-time employment, education and training opportunities, including income and childcare supports are emphasised among whom poverty rates are high and attachment to the labour market is weak (OPEN 2004).

A strong indication of a new policy approach towards lone parents is also evident following the publishing of a *Government Discussion Paper : Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents* in May 2006. Although presented as new policy developments to be directed specifically towards lone parents, these policies are likely in practice to be equally significant for other low income, welfare dependent households, for example those in receipt of unemployment payments. The core element of this change in policy is to ensure that a greater proportion of lone parents, and both parents in welfare dependent households, enter training and employment once their youngest child reaches between 5 and 7 years of age. Recent data indicates that around one-third of all lone parents were in paid employment including 48% of lone parents with school going children in 2005. (Central Statistics Office May 2006) Budget 2006 saw the upper earnings threshold for those on One Parent Family Payments increased by EURO 82 per week to EURO 375.

For the large number of lone parents (over 90% of whom are women) there are clear indications that their right and entitlement to long term welfare payments under the One Parent Family Payment is to undergo significant change in future policy development. This will potentially have a major impact on a large number of women, many of whom may benefit from additional training and employment opportunities but others of whom may find their opportunities for long term supported parenting seriously curtailed. Organisations representing Lone Parent have strongly stated that employment participation should be a choice rather than an imperative and that the critical issue of the provision of a comprehensive childcare system should underpin such choices. In this context they have expressed concern at the thinking underlying this new policy statement with its emphasis on making paid employment obligatory for many lone parents and women in low income households in the future. *"Reducing the expectation of long term benefit recipiency among new clients of One Parent Family Payment and a more forceful assistance in employment support policy are needed to help more lone parents into work"* (Department of Social Community and Family Affairs, 2006).

Effects on gender equality

From a gender perspective an important factor to take into account when assessing active labour market initiatives is that women are under-represented among those registered as long-term unemployed in Ireland. This is due to the household nature of the welfare system, the fact that only those available for full-time work are entitled to register, and the tendency for women who are not in paid employment to be categorised as 'inactive' rather than unemployed, particularly in the longer term. In the absence of any real movement towards individualisation, women in welfare dependent household are less likely to be eligible for either the BTWA or the BTEA as both are based mainly on long-term registration as unemployed or receipt of a welfare payment. Because the Irish social welfare system operates on a household basis, earnings of each individual adult can have a knock-on effect on the payments and benefits of another. Eligibility for important

secondary benefits, such as the medical card, are based on household income and consequently there is a disincentive for women for example, whose spouses are unemployed, to attain earnings above a specific threshold. This means that many women take up low paid part-time, often informal, employment in order to ensure that households retain their benefits. This situation has been exacerbated by recent changes to the eligibility for rent supplement, another secondary benefit available to those renting private accommodation. Currently if one of a couple is working full-time (30 hours) regardless of wages both are ineligible for rent supplement. This became effective from January 2004, arising from the Social Welfare Act 2003, and is another new and significant unemployment and welfare trap. A further restriction in relation to rent supplement introduced in 2004 is that applicants must be renting for a period of 6 months before becoming eligible to apply for a rent supplement. Strong reservations were expressed by many organisations from the community and voluntary as well as statutory sectors about the impact of such a provision on the most vulnerable groups, particularly immigrants and lone parents.

There are certain exceptions to this however, and one in particular is important from a gender perspective. Lone parents who have been on the One Parent Family Payment for 15 months are eligible for BTWA and BTEA. As over 80% of lone parents on social welfare are women, this provision reflects an understanding of the need to provide for female-headed welfare households as well as a recent policy focus aimed at increasing employment rates among lone parents. In this sense, while policy in this area has not been developed with any explicit gender perspective or reference to gender equality and mainstreaming, it does reflect a sensitivity to specific situations of low income and labour market disadvantage which bring important benefits to a significant number of women.

The proposed new integrated policy towards lone parents announced in 2006 sets out a new Parental Allowance (PA) to replace the One Parent Family Payment and also to abolish the Qualified Adult Allowance linked to other household payments, for example Unemployment Assistance. Its proposal include a new development under which 'compulsory engagement' with job facilitators once the youngest child reaches 5 years for all those on PA and an end to payments once the youngest child reaches 7 years. If the parent is not in employment or training at this stage it is proposed that they are then to be transferred to Unemployment Assistance or a Back to Work/Education Allowance. There is no indication as to how part-time employment, an option often favoured by women particularly those with significant caring responsibilities, is intended to be viewed under this proposed policy. Under the present system registration as unemployed is only open to those who demonstrate availability for full-time employment, a policy which discourages women from registration and as a consequence has been argued as discriminating against women in relation to certain active labour market programmes (National Women's Council 2002). If implemented, these new proposals represent a radical change in Irish social welfare policy encompassing a welcome emphasis on individual entitlements (rather than the traditional household system) but at the same time a proposed withdrawal of the right to long term welfare support (based on a proposed compulsory system of taking up training and employment) to parents of children over 5-7 years in low income households - the large majority of those likely to be affected by such a change are

women. Proposals for this change in direction have not been accompanied by a stronger commitment to comprehensive childcare supports or an extended elder care system, essential to the development of greater gender equality within Irish employment and social policy.

An important commitment under *Towards 2016*, that has real significance for the economic position of women who make up the majority of those on social welfare payments in Ireland, is an indexation of the lowest social welfare rate for a single person to a level of 30% of gross average industrial earnings by 2007. The agreement indicates that welfare rates will be benchmarked at that level over a ten year period. The practical implementation of this commitment can only be judged when the details of Budget 2006 are announced next December. For older women on State pensions, for women lone parents and for women in low income households the realisation of this policy in practice over the coming decade has the potential to bring important economic benefits. Budget 2006 introduced significant increases in social welfare payments including a 17% increase in the minimum unemployment assistance payment and particularly significant from the standpoint of women a 17% increase in Carer's Benefit. A new tax relief on those earning incomes up to EURO 10,000 was introduced in Budget 2006 available to those minding up to three children in their own homes. No data is yet available on the take up of this relief.

None of these policy initiatives and changes has an explicit or direct gender dimension. However, their gender impact is significant. In the first instance, more flexible eligibility criteria for BTWA and BTEA are provided for lone parents, the large majority of whom are women reflecting a new shift in policy towards increasing the employment rate of lone parents. The policy initiative of the three-year retention of the medical card after taking up employment is particularly significant to women, as lone parents and also as primary carers in low-income households. What is evident, however, is that these policy initiatives have been developed in the context of a household-based welfare system and do not address the underlying assumptions of this system. Because of the lack of individual entitlement for many women under a household-based system, many women do not meet the criteria necessary to benefit from such initiatives. Household-based means testing as well as household-based claimant systems means that significant numbers of women are dependants within the Irish welfare system. On the one hand, because they are not claimants in their own right, they do not benefit directly from phased withdrawal of benefits. On the other hand, many women are restricted to low paid, reduced hours and sometimes informal employment due to their concern about the potential negative impact on household income that additional earnings would have. Policy in this area has not been developed with any explicit gender perspective or reference to gender equality and mainstreaming. However it can be seen to incorporate a sensitivity to specific situations of low income and labour market disadvantage which bring important benefits to a significant number of women. Recent developments have broadened eligibility to active labour market programme to lone parents and spouses of the long-term unemployed. This has provided an important access route for many women, a situation which could be further improved by establishing eligibility on the

basis of *long-term absence from the labour market* rather than the current emphasis on those *registered as unemployed*.

Effects on gender equality and issues of gender mainstreaming

The expected impact on gender equality of the focus on lone parents is significant given that the vast majority are women. Many may benefit from additional training and employment opportunities but others may find their opportunities for long term supported parenting seriously curtailed. New policy proposals represent a radical change in Irish social welfare policy encompassing a welcome emphasis on individual entitlements (rather than the traditional household system) but at the same time a proposed withdrawal of the right to long term welfare support (based on a compulsory system of taking up training and employment) to parents of children over 5-7 years in low income households - the large majority of those likely to be affected by such a change are women (see Chapter 2 above).

The central issue in relation to women's access to employment is the lack of a proper care infrastructure. A Report from the OECD published in September 2004 strongly criticises Ireland's lack of early childhood education and care provision arguing for increased resources to improve provision. In addition, the Report argues for a system of paid parental leave of one year's duration – to replace the current system of unpaid leave over fourteen weeks. A further key recommendation is for a guaranteed publicly funded pre-primary place for all children and for full school days for all young children from disadvantaged areas (OECD 2004). Increasing the 'supply and affordability' of childcare facilities has been highlighted in both the Employment Taskforce and the Joint Employment Reports (2004) as a key recommendation to the Irish government. Ireland has a long way to go in the development of a comprehensive childcare system and existing measures, such as the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (mainly targeted at disadvantaged areas), while significant remain limited in tacking the scale of what has become termed the 'care crisis'.

A number of significant new policies were introduced under Budget 2006 which are likely to benefit women as primary carers, including extended leave entitlements and additional financial support to parents of young children. Ireland has not, however, adopted the Barcelona childcare targets and has no comprehensive provision for pre-school childcare or education. Despite some discussion of a pre-school child place for those aged three to four years of age no initiative has yet taken place to achieve this objective. Ireland lacks a developed system of policies in relation to the reconciliation of paid employment and care responsibilities. The lack of comprehensive public policies towards child and elder care has been identified at both national and at EU level as a major barrier towards further increases in women's employment. New data published in May 2006 revealed that the average cost of paid childcare was just over EURO 120 per week, representing a 23% increase over the two year period 2003-05. EU-SILC poverty data has shown that one in four children aged between 0 and 15 live in poverty in Ireland. (EU-SILC 2005) Budget 2006 saw the introduction of new financial supports for parents of young children, increases in child benefit and additional resources towards childcare

facilities. A childcare and child poverty package (valued at EURO 154m and EURO 314m in 2006 respectively) was announced in the Budget comprising :

- Annual EURO 1000 payment in respect of each child up to six years of age to all households irrespective of their labour market status commencing in 2006.
- Additional expenditure on childcare is stated to contribute to the development of 50,000 new childcare places and training of 17,000 childcare workers by 2010.
- Increased level of child benefit which took effect from July 2006 to new level of EURO 150 per month (EURO 185 for third and subsequent children).
- Earnings threshold for Family Income Supplement raised by EURO 19 to EURO 282.
- Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance of EURO 40 per child.
- A further development is the establishment of a childcare tax relief for those minding up to three children in their own home and where the childminding income is EURO 10,000 or less.
- Tax relief for the employment of a carer for a disabled or ill person was also raised from EURO 30,000 to 50,000.

National Agreement – Towards 2016

After an extended period of political lobbying and intensive negotiations a new National Agreement was reached between government, employers organisations and trade unions in June 2006, under the title of *Toward 2016*. For the first time this agreement provides for a 10 year framework encompassing economic, social and infrastructural developments. The central element of the agreement is a pay deal giving workers a 10% pay increase phased in over a 27 month period.

Under the central pay deal of *Towards 2016* the commitment to an additional increase of 0.5% to those on EURO 10.25 per hour or less is also important for those on low pay, mainly women, migrant and young workers. Other relevant policies in relation to skill development and educational access are detailed below.

Under the terms of *Toward 2016* two important policy changes which are significant to those on low pay in the Irish economy were introduced :

- the National Minimum Wage (NMW) was increased from the rate set in May 2005 of EURO 7.65 per hour to EURO 8.65 in February 2007.
- a new Office of Director of Employment Rights Compliance (ODERC) has been established which 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. The number of Labour Inspectors is to be trebled from 31 to 90 by the end of 2007 and new harsher penalties for non-compliance are to be set down. Legislation to protect whistleblowers is promised.

While neither of these policies are gender specific, previous research has shown that women account for the majority of those on low pay and would likely benefit from a higher minimum wage rate particularly where enforcement systems are strengthened. More recent research indicates that migrant workers, including significant increased numbers from new EU accession States, are accounting for a growing number of those in low paid unskilled jobs where issues of levels of minimum payment and enforcement of labour standards are critical for both women and men.

The National Minimum Wage was introduced in Ireland on 1st April 2000 at a level of £4.40 (equivalent to €5.58), with increases in 2001, 2002, 2004 and a further increase in February 2007 raising it to €8.65 per hour. The NMW has a role to play in narrowing wage differentials because women tend to occupy a greater proportion of those jobs that pay the NMW. The ESRI has examined the impact of the minimum wage and found that more women than men had been earning below the minimum wage and were typically working less than 30 hours per week, generally as clerical workers or in the services sector (ESRI, 1999). The number of employees on the NMW was highlighted in a more recent study of employers by the ESRI (2003). It showed that 32,500 private sector employees were paid below the NMW in 2002. The Hotels/Restaurants/Bars sector had the highest number of firms with employees working at or below the full adult minimum wage level (38%), followed by the Retail sector (22%), and the Personal and Other Services sector (17%). The authors note that the higher proportion in the Hotels/Restaurants/Bars sector may reflect among other things the increasing prevalence of immigrant workers. While the overall proportion of private sector employees at or below the full adult minimum wage was 4.5 percent (ESRI, 2003) the figure for the proportion of women was 7 percent and as high as 16 percent for women working part-time. Census data show that women are highly concentrated in the broad occupational groupings of Clerical/Secretarial, Personal and Protective Services and Sales (CSO, 2003). An important additional commitment under *Towards 2016* is to the development of a new Code of Practice for women engaged in domestic service.

Gender Pay Gap

The persistence of a high gender pay gap and the lack of specific strategies to address it, represent key challenges to gender equality in Ireland. ‘Urgent action’ to tackle the causes of the gender pay gap in Ireland is called for in the EU Joint Employment Report (2004). While the Irish Employment Action Plan (2004) details recommendations of the Consultative Group on Male/Female Differentials (covering leave entitlements, taxation reform, childcare etc), it contains no indication as to how these recommendations are to be implemented, where the responsibility lies and what kind of targets and timeframe will be applied. Building on the Consultative Group’s study of male/female differentials, further research on the gender pay gap at sectoral level was published in 2004. Trends in the gender pay gap highlighted in these studies include the significant level of the gap (including among recent third level graduates), the impact of horizontal, and particularly vertical segregation, the importance of policies to support women’s paid employment during childrearing years, such as childcare, family friendly and flexible workplace policies and the need for equality and audit action plans at sectoral level together with

improved statistical and monitoring systems. (Consultative Group on Male/Female Wage Differentials 2002, Indecon, 2004) In the context of the National Reform Programme for Employment a definite strategy to address the gender pay gap is central to ensuring that a gender equality perspective is informing employment policy in practice.

The importance of women's increased employment rate is acknowledged but the Strategy lacks any specific policies towards women's paid employment or latent labour supply. In this context, the absence of an equal opportunities guideline in the current European Employment Strategy is likely to have contributed to a lack of focus on gender issues in Irish employment strategy. Gender mainstreaming has become marginalised in current stated employment policy and gender equality appears to have slid off the agenda.

Commitments to a new National Skills Strategy with a particular focus on lower skilled and vulnerable workers and linked to targeted assistance in manufacturing and funds to help workers access basic education and in returning to third level education are promised under *Towards 2016*. No details of the scale of the funding or conditions of eligibility have yet been announced. No gender specific analysis is evident in the development of these policies and it is likely that where the focus is on manufacturing and construction women will be underrepresented among those benefiting from such funds. A broader focus on low paid or low skilled workers would be more likely to result in greater gender equality in accessing new support systems.

Two important new employment policies are in the process of being introduced by the Irish government but are not yet at the stage of implementation. Firstly the Employment Permits Bill was published in July 2005 representing proposed new legislation covering eligibility criteria and the system of issuing of work permits to non-EU immigrants onto the Irish labour market. A second development has been the announcement of an extended system of supports primarily to employers in relation to the employment of people with disabilities. Under this system, supports are graded towards employers based on the number of disabled employees in their organisation - a total expenditure of EURO 10 ml is projected under this initiative over the 2006-09 period. Neither of these initiatives have a specific gender dimension or gender focus - they are essentially 'gender neutral'.

Another important new policy development of particular benefit to women and towards greater gender equality has been the extension of maternity leave by four weeks in 2006 and further weeks promised for 2007 bringing paid leave from 18 to 22 weeks in 2006 and to 26 weeks in 2007 as well as an entitlement to a 18 week period of unpaid leave. In addition, maternity leave payments have been increased from 70% to 80% of reckonable earnings. Parental leave entitlement has also been increased which, while it continues to be unpaid, can potentially be combined with maternity leave to establish a new leave entitlement of 56 weeks in 2007, 26 of which are paid at 80% of pay (for those with a sufficient employment record payment). In addition, the maximum age for an eligible child under parental leave entitlements has been raised from 5 to 8 years, those acting 'in loco parentis' have been included and 'force majeure' leave has been extended to same sex

partners. However parental leave continues to be unpaid in Ireland and there is no provision for paternity leave.

Over the period 2006-2008 it is proposed to develop a more integrated programme of measures to support the movement of lone parents into more full-time and quality employment, which would comprise the following elements:

- Reform of income support schemes:
- Expanded availability and range of education and training opportunities for lone parents:
- Extension of the National Employment Action Plan to focus on lone parents :
- Focused provision of childcare; and
- Improved information services for lone parents.

From the standpoint of gender equality there have been few significant changes in Irish employment policy over recent years. No new policies have been introduced to tackle gender gaps in employment, unemployment or pay. However, as indicated above, policies towards increasing the minimum wage and indexing welfare payments are likely to benefit women particularly those on low pay and in low income households. In addition, new developments in childcare supports and in leave entitlements are likely to strengthen women's attachment to the labour market, particularly among middle and younger age groups. While these changes will likely result in a narrowing of the employment gap over the medium term, their effect on the gender wage gap is less clear. Ireland's public childcare system remains underdeveloped and lacking in a comprehensive childcare policy. Inequality persists as a strong feature of Ireland's high growth and poverty rates among women lone parents, those living alone as well as those in low paid employment remain high.

Summary and conclusion

Recent economic and social policy acknowledges women as the largest group amongst those marginalised from the labour market specifying lone parents and mothers of larger families in particular. Development of care services infrastructure in relation to children, older people and those with a disability recognises how care responsibilities have impacted particularly on women's access to employment. A number of significant new policies have recently been introduced which are likely to benefit women as the primary carers, including extended leave entitlements and additional financial support to parents of young children.

Current policy development reflects a contradiction evident in labour market policy towards women in Ireland. On the one hand there is the objective, supported by recent policy changes, of increasing the employment rate of women, including that of lone parents. On the other, there is a continuing assumption of the provision of care by, primarily women, in households or through the private market place, an assumption reflected in a low level of public provision. These contradictory aspects of policy are particularly evident in relation to lone parents towards whom there is pressure to reduce their dependence on welfare through accessing employment primarily and, to an extent,

training and education. But there is little evidence of a parallel commitment to a system of care which is essential for lone parents to take up such opportunities.

At the present time, in the context of a new national agreement, the transition to a new national development plan and a pre-election period, significant new employment policy initiatives, with particular relevance for gender equality, tend to emerge from the social partnership and budgetary processes rather than under EU Action Plans. However, it remains important that the EU response to Ireland's National Reform Programme emphasises the need for a strengthened commitment to gender mainstreaming in the new development plan as well as a specific gender equality programme in relation to childcare, the gender pay gap, individualisation of social welfare, leave entitlements, women returners, women migrant workers and lone parents.

Inequality persists as a strong feature of Ireland's high growth and poverty rates among women lone parents, those living alone as well as those in low paid employment remain high. A number of significant new policies were recently introduced which are likely to benefit women as the primary carers, including extended leave entitlements and additional financial support to parents of young children. New policy proposals in relation to 'jobless households' (both lone parent and other welfare dependent households) indicate a likely change in government policy towards a compulsory engagement in paid employment by those whose youngest child has reached 5-7 years of age. Proposals for this change in direction have not been accompanied by a stronger commitment to comprehensive childcare supports or an extended elder care system, essential to the development of greater gender equality within Irish employment and social policy.

A number of key changes are necessary in order to reduce level of disadvantage experienced by women in relation to paid employment in Ireland :

- establishment of access to labour market programmes on the basis of long term absence from the labour market thus ensuring eligibility for the so-called 'inactive' as well as the registered unemployed
- development of a comprehensive programme of childcare and eldercare provision
- indexation of National Minimum wage
- entitlement of those seeking part-time employment to register as unemployed
- further improvement in the system of leave entitlements including paid parental and paternity leave
- setting of a higher level of earnings disregard for lone parents indexed to inflation
- policies to address the system of secondary benefit entitlement in order to establish a phased out system in place of the existing system
- development of national and company based training and development programmes based on a gender needs analysis
- measures to address the gender pay gap
- specific policies towards disadvantaged sectors of women, for example migrant women and disabled women

At a more general policy level a comprehensive review and assessment of implementation of gender impact assessment guidelines and gender mainstreaming under the National Development Plan 2000-06 should be carried out with a view to establishing a stronger gender mainstreaming perspective across the policy system under the new NDP 2007-13. In addition increased resourcing of targeted gender equality initiatives, together with gender equality targets in key policy areas need to be put in place. Further development of gender disaggregated data, including in relation to disadvantaged minorities, is essential in order the current and future employment policy is clearly informed by a gender specific analysis. In the context of a lower rate of economic growth and reduced level of public expenditure only a strong commitment to gender equality within the political and policy-making system will ensure that these key issues are addressed.

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