



Women's
Collective
Ireland

WOMEN'S EQUALITY
&
DEVELOPMENT
ANNUAL REPORT 2023



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth

Disadvantaged women are the target group for all Women’s Collective Ireland Projects - in the main, WCI Projects recognise disadvantage in relation to women’s socio-economic circumstances. In addition, rural Projects work with women who are often further disadvantaged through social isolation and lack of access to supports and services. Marginalised women are identified through outreach, consultation, local statistics and information.

DCEDIY funding enables the WCI Board to employ 48 staff, 4 at national level and 44 locally throughout the 17 project areas. At local level, WCI staff outreach and engage women experiencing disadvantage and lever in programme funding to support women’s equality and voice in their communities.

At the beginning of 2023, WCI Projects developed and started to deliver local area workplans based on four strategic areas of priority: Engagement, Participation, Policy and Equality and Organisational Development & Sustainability. The objectives and actions within these strategic areas are in line with, and indeed reflected in, the National Women’s Strategy 2017-2020 whose overall goal is ‘to change attitudes and practices preventing women’s and girl’s full participation in education, employment, and public life, at all levels, and to improve services for women and girls, with priority given to the needs of those experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, the poorest outcomes’.

Actions undertaken by WCI Projects in 2023 under the area of Engagement, supported and helped progress the following National Women’s Strategy 2017-2020 high level objectives to:

- Advance socio-economic equality for women and girls.
- Advance the physical and mental health and well-being of women and girls.
- Ensure the visibility in society of women and girls, and their equal and active citizenship.
- Advance women in leadership at all levels.
- Combat violence against women.
- Embed gender equality in decision-making.

WCI Strategic Priority 1: Engagement

Engage with women experiencing disadvantage through outreach and predevelopment work to reduce isolation, increase confidence, build relationships and empower women.

Objectives	Actions
<i>To support marginalised women to overcome the barriers that prevent them from reaching their full potential in society.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Develop outreach strategies to engage the most marginalised and isolated women to support their participation.</i> • <i>Carry out needs assessments to identify appropriate services and supports.</i> • <i>Provide services and supports where needed to address barriers.</i> • <i>Facilitate access through referrals to existing services and supports available.</i>

<p><i>To engage, support and encourage women to participate in all aspects of community life.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Retain and develop our presence in local communities, providing first point of contact including drop-in centres.</i>
<p><i>To engage women and promote women's equality</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Organise events and information sessions/opportunities that provide hard to reach women, with information on specific issues that affect them. (E.g., Health screening, education, VAW services) and referring or signposting to existing services.</i> • <i>Support the development of networking and support structures for women in local communities.</i>
<p><i>To raise awareness of women's equality issue.</i></p>	<p><i>Use a collective approach to raising awareness by marking key dates and engaging women in a range of campaigns of key dates and events for women i.e. International Women's Day, Rural Women's Day, 16 Days of Action Against Violence Against Women etc.</i></p>

In 2023, WCI Projects continued to outreach to the most marginalised women in their areas. Women were supported within the Projects or signposted to other services and supports based on identified needs. Supports to women ranged from counselling, childcare, parenting, domestic abuse, mentoring, to FEAD distribution, mental health and well woman clinics and women's group support etc. Project staff worked with women in groups and individually, supporting and encouraging them to access services and supports available in their communities.

Projects also used a variety of methods to promote and facilitate access to services, including newsletters, media, websites and social media, one-to-one engagements, referrals and word of mouth. Agencies that projects referred to include training centres, VTOS, NALA, Women's Aid, Women's refuges, MABs, Pieta House, Legal Aid, SICAP, Homecare Agencies, Social Workers etc.

With no programme funding available to them, our Projects worked hard to try and source funding from a variety of sources. Money leveraged allowed them to deliver a range of engagement opportunities and capacity building and tailored learning activities, often involving extensive outreach work in hard-to-reach communities.

Such activities included the provision of events, information and training aimed at women. These events are also used to disseminate information and create awareness regarding their project, or issues of relevance to women in their areas; and to consult with them on issues that may be of concern or affecting them.

International Women's Day (8th March) events were hosted by all 17 WCI Women's Projects which provided opportunities to outreach, highlight women's equality issues and raise the

profile of WCI work at local level and celebrate women's achievements. The IWD theme for 2023 was **#EmbraceEquity**.

In 2023, **305** events/learning opportunities, including information days/sessions, enrolment days, coffee mornings, open days, fundraisers, awareness-raising events, and celebration days were held involving **5,333** women. They also included mental health and wellbeing activities, a variety of exercise, and craft/ cooking activities along with awareness raising campaigns on issues such as Cervical and Breast Cancer Awareness, 16 Days of Action Opposing Violence Against Women, Gender Equality Awareness, Mental Health, Human Trafficking, and various local campaigns.

In the context of the National Women's Strategy, these events help advance the physical and mental health and wellbeing of women and girls while ongoing work on highlighting violence against women and girls and support services available to them, support NWS actions to combat violence against women.

Since the Covid-19 Pandemic, technology has played and continues to play a major part in reaching out and remaining engaged with community women especially through periods of restrictions. Staff continued to use technologies that were available to themselves, to the women in their communities, and whatever technologies women were comfortable with.

The telephone is a vital tool of engagement, both landline and mobile. Staff reach out and called women individually, giving them the space to listen to concerns, as well as communicating information about supports available locally. People understand information in relation to themselves, and calls could be tailored to suit, as many of the women we work with are known to us personally. The calls could at times be lengthy especially to older women who are finding it hard to reengage with social groups post pandemic and are missing social contact. However, this is an important part of our unique work with women at a grassroots level.

We estimate that WCI staff made at least **12,168** telephone calls to women in 2023.

Since the pandemic, many women quickly have become comfortable with smart phones and their many applications. Projects continue to text or WhatsApp thousands of messages to keep women in touch with us and our projects. In 2023, over **80,000** messages were sent to women to engage or keep women informed of activities or events.

Social media also plays a huge part in engaging with women. In 2023, social media was used to share and promote information, events and activities, and supports/services available locally and remotely.

Over **7,834** posts were made to social media.

Where there was capacity and technology available, Zoom continued to be used for virtual/hybrid meetups of women who may have had issues with transport, child or elder care.

WCI projects made a total estimated **108,946** engagements with women in 2023.

Most WCI Projects operate a 'Drop In' service to women in their communities while all operate an 'Open Door' policy which means they welcome women into the project at any time during its open hours. 2023 continued as a time of reengagement and encouraging women out of their homes and back into services. **2,379** hours of one-to-one personal support was given to women in 2023 and a total of **814** counselling sessions were delivered in our projects.



Activities 2023

Referrals

WCI projects refer women to other statutory agencies and services and community organisations and in turn also receive referrals from agencies. In 2023, Projects continued to get and make referrals to other community and statutory agencies around different needs and are signposting and raising awareness of resources available to women and their families during this time. Agencies referred to and from included: Tusla, PHNs, CDPs, FRCs, ETB's, St. Vincent de Paul, refuges, addiction services and MABs.

WCI Strategic Priority 2: Participation

Facilitate progression of women experiencing disadvantage from engagement to active participation.

Objectives	Actions
To mobilise women, raising their consciousness of the issues affecting them	Promote and support the engagement of women experiencing disadvantage to participate in women centred capacity building programmes.
To build women's capacity to represent the collective concerns of women especially those from marginalised communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and carry out actions that support and provide opportunities that enable women to develop their potential and make informed choices about their future. Actions to include consciousness raising, empowerment, feminism and equality. • Provide women's community education programmes. Support and organise the delivery of a range of accessible formal and non-formal community education and training programmes, that are tailored to meet the needs of women in our communities.
To represent and support women's representation and participation in a range of relevant structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify relevant local structures for women's participation including PPNs, local school's committees, LCDCs, partnerships, ETBs were women's participation. • Support participation of new and existing women's groups and build capacity by supporting volunteers with skills to participate on community policy and decision-making fora.
To challenge barriers to women's participation locally, regionally and nationally	Support women to name barriers to their participation and work with relevant organisations to identify needs and reduce barriers to women's participation.

Community education is a way of working for many Projects in Women's Collective Ireland. Often our projects are the only provider of education and training specifically designed to cater for disadvantaged women in an area. In recognition of women in their role as primary carers, our Projects plan, promote and deliver a range of accredited and non-accredited education programmes in response to the identified needs in a local area.

These are funded by monies leveraged in locally by the projects themselves with certain funds being ringfenced for certain activities. In 2023, WCI leveraged in €255,085.

425 women participated in **1,717** hours of accredited education and training while a further **4,610** women participated in **5,370** hours of unaccredited community education and training.



Women's Collective Ireland

International Women's Day Celebration 2023

Join us on the Monday the 6th March 2023 for a cup of coffee and a chat about women and ageing. This year we are celebrating Women's Day in the spirit of our Irish women's heritage.

Supporting Women

DATE: Monday 06/03/2023
TIME: 10 AM - 1pm
BALLYOWEN COMMUNITY CENTRE

All are welcome to International Women's Day
 Celebrating & Inspiring Women

For more info please contact us on
 WhatsApp: 0845 111 2018 / 0845 665 7167
 Email: info@womenscollectiveireland.ie

For further details, visit our website: www.womenscollectiveireland.ie




Women's Collective Ireland 2023

The summer months are normally quieter for the women's projects in terms of activities and participation and projects spent a lot of time loosely planning for activities for the autumn/winter months. This involved revising and adapting workplans and trying to adjust programmes, so that not only was delivery possible but was compliant with the everchanging guidelines and accessible to women in the community.

WCI Projects identify and actively participate in local social inclusion and education and training networks to highlight the needs of local disadvantaged women and promote the activities and services that local education and training organisations have to offer. In 2022, committees/interagency groups with WCI members included family support networks, community education networks, training networks, mental health and domestic violence networks to public participation networks, childcare networks and committees, feminist networks, women in business, social inclusion, and other interagency groups.

Such participation of women helps put a greater focus on gender issues and not only women's participation in general, but on the voices of socially excluded women at a community level and in policy and decision-making fora. The participation of women at a community level supports the progression of the NWS objective of ensuring the visibility in society of women and girls, and their Equal and Active Citizenship in Irish society.

WCI local, regional and national structures also further provide an effective framework for challenging barriers by building capacity and enabling women not usually heard to have a voice.

Projects have identified that one of the main barriers to women's participation is childcare. Projects support women to access affordable childcare through provision of places at childcare facilities attached to our Projects, or by signposting women to community childcare in their areas thereby improving access to these opportunities for many disadvantaged women. Some of our Projects offer crèche, preschool and afterschool services. In 2023, we offered 50 weekly preschool sessions to children in our project areas.

WCI Strategic Priority 3: Policy & Equality

Develop strategies to promote women’s equality and inclusion and highlight policy issues.

Objectives	Actions
To promote disadvantaged women’s equality and inclusion locally and nationally	Research, identify and articulate the needs of disadvantaged women at decision making arenas locally, regionally and nationally, to influence the development of policies and decisions that affect their lives.
To highlight the needs and perspectives of disadvantaged women by challenging inequalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop relevant awareness raising events and campaigns. • Engage with all Government Departments on issues in relation to women.
To collaborate and work in partnership on relevant representational structures in relation to women’s equality issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategically collaborate and work in partnership with local, regional and national organisations on relevant and agreed objectives to benefit disadvantaged women. • Feed into policy development in relation to women experiencing disadvantage through representations, submissions and contributions to policy documents. • Join and become active in the Community Platform
To build capacity of WCI Projects to outreach, engage and support participation of women experiencing disadvantage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build and strengthen the capacity of local women to identify and voice their concerns and participate in society.
To highlight women’s equality issues	Develop and effectively implement local area work plans and results framework, based on local needs and in line with agreed national equality priorities.

WCI Women’s Projects continue to play a critical role in raising awareness of gender equality through engagement with local development companies, rural development agencies and other local, regional and national bodies tasked with community and local development.

The Women’s Equality & Development Programme provides an opportunity for greater visibility for women in poverty and living in disadvantaged communities.

WCI Projects have the capacity and the experience to act as a link between national policy actions and what happens on the ground. The local workplans of our projects respond to

locally identified needs but are also informed by national policies such as: *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: the national policy framework for children and young people*, *National Physical Activity Plan for Ireland*, *LGBTI Inclusion Strategy*, *Connecting for Life: Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015-2020*, *National Disability Inclusion Strategy*, *Our Communities: A framework policy for local and community development in Ireland*, *Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence 2016-2021*

WCI Projects work collaboratively in their communities to ensure that they resource individuals and communities that are most socially excluded to access participate and become involved with policy, practice and decision-making processes on matters affecting them and their local community.

The WCI Women's Projects provide opportunities for greater influence and synergies with local government structures, and particularly in ensuring that gender equality is mainstreamed across local government and through the work of local community and development organisations.

Projects have actively participated in planning and consultation workshops feeding into Local Community Development Plan, ensuring that the voice of women was heard at local planning and decision-making tables.

Alignment and the restructuring of local government in recent years has meant changes in many of the areas in which WCI works, however some project staff have been elected on to the new Local Community Development Committee in their area while others are members of local community development and social inclusion working groups.

A major strength of WCI is the way in which it effectively connects women at the local level to a strategic role at the national level, and in turn links national priorities to the local level. WCI staff represented women's affairs at local level and participated in decision making structures. WCI staff and advisory committee members sat on boards and committees including LDC Boards, RAPID AITs, PPNs, Youth Forum, local education networks.

Communication between WCI staff and the wider network of community and interagency workers who have built up great working relationships over the years and were able to respond to issues as they arose. Some projects such as WCI South Kerry continue to be part of the Kerry Ukrainian Interagency Response Forum working to meet the ongoing needs of the hundreds of Ukrainian refugees who fled the war in March 2022 in addition to other asylum seekers.

Nationally, the WCI are represented on the NWCI Board, NSWG Implementation Committee and NGO sub-group, Aontas, Abortion Working Group, Irish Observatory on Violence against Women, Policy Advisory Group on Women in Local Government and Development, Community Work Ireland (CWI), Community Platform, Crann Childcare Support Agency, the Irish Network against Racism (INAR) and the Ukraine Civil Society Forum.

WCI Strategic Priority Area 4: Organisational Development & Sustainability

Develop the WCI to be able to fulfil its objectives and to ensure the sustainability of the organisation.

Objectives	Actions
To build capacity of WCI management to support the WCI locally and nationally to develop and enhance operational capacity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen the WCI Board by ongoing capacity building and upskilling. • Ensure highest levels of governance and accountability. • Ensure the NCCWN Board are complying with employment responsibilities and obligations.
To ensure the sustainability of WCI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide staff development and training. • Ensure feedback mechanisms are in place to support communications between local and national structures. • Ensure Advisory Groups locally are supported to participate in governance structures at local and national level. • Identify organisational needs and develop strategies to ensure adequate resources to support the sustainability of the organisation.
To develop and consolidate the collective approach of the WCI.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop new organisational strategic plan reflective of the organisations vision & mission and of changing structures. • Continue to maintain and develop robust planning and reporting processes and procedures.
To develop a national profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to develop and strengthen WCI national profile under the new Department. • Further strengthen and develop a collective WCI brand.
To build capacity of WCI management and staff to inform and input to organisational and policy development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish and agree a format for projects to promote the mission and vision of WCI. • Coordinate local actions and promote and brand these actions under the banner of WCI.

NATIONAL WORK

- **Meeting with Minister O' Gorman** - National staff met with Minister and DCEDIY Equality Unit Principal Officer on 1st February and discussed the work at local level, the rolling out of our national and local implementation plans and a range of current concerns and issues impacting on grassroots women.
- **WCI Pre-Budget Submission** was submitted to the Minister in June. The submission was circulated by each of the 17 Local WCI Projects to their public representatives. The Board were appreciative of the increase to 2023 core funding, which enabled the WCI Board to apply:
 - A 2% salary increase to all WCI staff.
 - An increase to some staffing hours, which has taken into account local Projects needs and equity in relation to staffing hours, and within funding limits of the 2023 increase.
 - An increase to Admin & Overhead budgets for 2023 to support Projects with the rising costs of living.
 - Funding to develop and deliver a National 'Women's Leadership' Programme - rolled out in all 17 local Projects in 2023.
- **WCI Strategic Priorities Working Groups (Staff) set up in 2023:**
 - **Continuous Professional Development Working Group** making recommendations to the Board on staff training and development.
 - **The Diversity & Inclusion Working Group** make recommendations to the Board, having explored WCI's position and developed a process which maintains WCI as an inclusive organisation. The working group will also feed into the review and development of a diversity and inclusion policy for WCI.
 - **Women's Leadership Working Group** making recommendations to the Board to support Women's leadership, identified:
 - The lack of local programmes was highlighted in our local action plan review.
 - The need to address barriers for women accessing Leadership RolesThis group fed into the design and delivery of the WCI Women and Leadership programme delivered in each of the WCI Projects in 2023.
- **WCI Women and Leadership Programme - Each of the 17 WCI Projects delivered the programme in 2023 with 184 women participating in the following thematic workshops over an eight-week period:**
 1. Introduction: Dare to Lead: A model of Personal and Professional Empowerment.
 2. The Personal Is Political: *Invisible Power, Visible Exclusion, Community Structures*
 3. Starting with Women: *Feminist Analyses*
 4. Leadership Styles: *Power relations*
 5. *Public Speaking: Effective Communication* as a function of leadership
 6. Voting Awareness - registering/ how vote system works.
 7. Local Government Structures - field trips to local Co Council
 8. Make Women Visible - Role models - "If you can see it, be it!"Feedback indicated that the programme had very positive impacts on participants and the evaluation report (on WCI website) will feed into development of 2024 WCI Women and Leadership programme.
- **WCI Grassroots Women's Manifesto** - WCI reviewed and updated the 'WCI Grassroots Women's Manifesto' in 2023. WCI Focus groups with grassroots women took place in

our projects and the feedback was collated. It is the experience of WCI Projects that, those most marginalised with whom we work, have the clearest view of the effects of government policies on their lives and those of their families and communities. The manifesto was developed to help ensure the inclusion of grassroots women's voices in policy and decision-making spaces. The Manifesto will be launched in January 2024.

- **WCI as an inclusive organisation** - In 2023, funding was secured from IHREC to run a WCI Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Awareness Seminar in 2024 aiming to reinforce Women's Collective Ireland as an inclusive organisation promoting human rights, equality and intercultural understanding and progressing a shared organisation approach contributing to the eradication of discrimination. The seminar is aimed at increasing WCI staff' awareness and understanding of multiple forms of discrimination by exploring the themes of Ableism, Ageism, Racism, Sexism, Homophobia and Transphobia with expert guest speakers on the topics. WCI will continue to generate creative and participatory spaces for dialogue and sharing learning fostering changes in attitudes and behaviours through increasing awareness and understanding.
- **Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth** - WCI were invited to the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to discuss: "Challenges facing women accessing education, leadership & political roles" in June 2023. WCI highlighted that community and feminist education enhances critical consciousness, awareness of power relations and increases social and political knowledge. We asked that these programmes are funded. WCI shares a collective vision for an island of well-educated society not just those who can easily afford it. This would be hugely productive for the family, community, the economy, leading to challenges to inequalities.
- In 2023, WCI made a submission on IHREC's Ireland and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland's fourth periodic report (ICESCR). WCI raised issues in the sections on civil society participation, education, and participation in public life. This report will be launched in 2024.
- In 2023, WCI engaged with the Centre for Effective Services (CES) Bechaire research exploring community education role supporting lone parents. WCI Ronanstown will do a case study with learners, tutors and Trustees. This research report will be launch early 2024.

ONGOING STAFF ENGAGEMENT

WCI staff are placed in the 17 projects around Ireland which can make it challenging to have personal interaction. However, all staff came together in March for Project Sharing Celebrating the Work and in November for Health and Safety training. Staff also took part in online sessions, including inclusion & diversity and health & wellbeing. During 2023, staff training and development also included:

- AEIB Workshop - All Ireland standards of community work overview
- WCI Support & Supervision training
- Staff Gathering: Ailbhe Smyth - Project Sharing & Celebrating Work. Red Tent & Circle dance
- Workplace Wellbeing: work boundaries self-care session
- DESSA online disability training

- 25 WCI staff took part in an online Advocacy programme, delivered by the Southeast Technological University (SETU), leading to a Level 6 award.

○
Staff Engagement/Shared Learning space - Throughout 2023, staff took part in online Zoom shared learning sessions to share best practice and learn from each other. Shared Learning space sessions started in 2023 with the aim to host one each month covering aspects of the local work in Projects work plans:

- 3rd Level Outreach Community University Women and Gender Studies - WCI Ronanstown Coordinator
- Working with and to support Ukrainian Women - WCI South Kerry Coordinator
- Presentation on study trip to Italy looking at community education/development work - WCI Dun Laoghaire Project Worker
- Sexual Health Promotion training - WCI Tallaght Coordinator
- Women's Participation in Politics and Political Spaces - WCI Limerick Coordinator
- Presentation on debunking myths of the far right - raising awareness and developing solidarity within our communities - WCI Clare Coordinator
- Overview of their Community Garden - experiences of sustainability and eco feminism - WCI Wexford Coordinator and Development Worker
- Self-Care in the Workplace including supportive tips - WCI Liffey Valley Coordinator
- Women's Well Woman Centre - WCI North Leitrim Project Coordinator

As part of WCI's employee benefit in kind programme, all staff are offered an Employee Assistance Plan (EAP), where they can avail of free counselling service for them and their family members and may also avail of online/phone medical advice. The Board of WCI are researching a Health Plan benefit scheme for staff commencing in 2024.